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DAR'S END

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Also by H. E. BATES
The Two Sisters: A novel

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DAY'S END

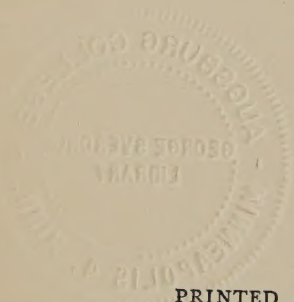
and other Stories by

H. E. BATES



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To
George William Lucas,
also a story-teller

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DAY'S END

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I

Ever since daybreak a strong east wind had raged, the trees had kept up a savage moaning and the clouds had shrunk into a drab, solid mass. And all day the sun had not shone, and only at evening, when sinking, had glowed for one instant on the tree-tops, the black roofs of the barns, the steeple of the church and the sombre sky.

As Israel Rentshaw came home through his paddock, hobbling badly, he stopped to bring in his horse, a lean old thing which hobbled too, and struggling slowly against this wind, which now and then tore out the ends of his red neckerchief and whipped across his face strands of his horse's mane, led the nag through the orchard towards the white farmhouse visible at the far end. In the dusky orchard the apple-trees, the cherry-trees and the damsons all looked black and alike. About Israel and the horse kept flying pieces of straw, feathers of ducks and hens, and twigs which snapped off the trees and fell in a pattering shower. Close at hand a pond

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fringed with alders and poplars gleamed, and beyond were visible groups of black wooden barns, stacks of straw and hay, manure-heaps, old carts, harrows, heaps of stone and drainage pipes covered with dead weeds. Further off dim shapes of woods slept and solitary trees and endless stretches of fields. But a mile away the river by which the village rested, the meadows and the village itself were already lost in darkness.

In the house a light was burning. As they passed, Israel and the horse were for an instant lit up and the patches of white in the horse's nose matched perfectly the colour of Israel's hair.

The horse was led into the stables, hay was shaken down and the door bolted. Israel, as he hobbled towards the house, sniffed at the wind, which to him smelled strongly of manure, something cooking and of snow. And on entering the kitchen where an oil-lamp was burning he remarked:

'There's snow about, you'll see.'

By the fire a woman sat. She seemed to be in the late thirties, dark, homely and plain-looking, with red cheeks and a dark dress, the neck of which she had pinned high up with an old-fashioned brooch of silver. It was his daughter, Henrietta. She glanced up and said:

'How late you are again. Where have you been?'

'It's all right,' he impatiently muttered.

He sat down and began to take off his boots.

'It's nearly seven,' the woman went on. 'Why

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don't you come in earlier and rest yourself? You're always at it. You work too hard.'

'It's all right!' he repeated, still with impatience. 'How many more times?'

'It's true, you know it.' She bent forward, put before him soup with swimming bread and vegetables, and looked at him with an expression of despair. 'Give it up – don't slave any more. Here we are, working our fingers over nothing. And it's lonely – nobody ever comes up.' Her voice became beseeching and tender. 'You've worked long enough. Let's go and live in the village. You're seventy.'

'How can we?' he answered. 'What should we do?'

She did not answer. He began to eat. The smell of broth, fresh tea, wood-smoke, dried herbs, malt and something sour was delicious to him. He ate with relish, not speaking to her.

Then suddenly, from the fire, she said:

'I forgot, there's a letter.'

Israel paused, glanced up and repeated: 'A letter?' shortly and with distaste. 'Who's that from?' he asked.

She brought it to him. When he took the envelope he did not speak but only stared, and when she brought his spectacles grunted, but did not look at her.

There was silence again. Israel began to read the letter, then having read it over, read it again, and then again.

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'We beg to inform you,' he read, 'that in accordance with the instructions of the executors of the late Duke of F —, that part of the Duchy, viz. The valley of the Shem, from Shetsoe to the tributary Bide along the north bank, up to and including the forty acres, two roods, fifteen poles, rented by you on the said north bank, will on or before April 5th be offered for sale. To existing tenants, sales by private deed are, however, practicable, if entered into not later than March 22nd. We respectfully solicit your attention to this.'

The letter came from a firm of lawyers. There was nothing else except that the words 'Strictly Confidential' were written on the envelope and that both in the address and in the letter his name had been misspelt.

The cold, legal formality of the letter, its significance and suddenness shocked him. He felt a chill seize him. He turned the letter over and over again with a crisp rustling sound, and when he drank swallowed with difficulty and tasted nothing.

Suddenly he saw his daughter fix her eyes on him. At once he made efforts to act normally, pretended to look interested in some bacon hanging on the wall and put the letter carelessly away. Soon afterwards he unwound his red neckerchief, left the table and sat down before the fire without a word.

Henrietta soon afterwards sat down too. There was silence except that in one corner a clock ticked.

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On the face of this, and on Israel's and his daughter's too, firelight came to rest in a pink, tranquil glow.

Fragments of the letter, as he sat there, began to go through Israel's head. Sometimes a whole sentence, then only a snatched word or phrase would pass. And to such obscure and difficult statements as 'Sales by private deed' would be added the wishes his daughter had expressed: 'Don't slave any more, you've worked long enough.'

All the time he sat there he was troubled, at war first with himself, then with the lawyers who had dealt this blow, and then with Henrietta. His white hair, his pale eyes and wrinkled face, his bent shoulders, his untidy beard and continued sniffing, all gave an impression of something simple, weakening and pathetic.

And at the thought of losing his land he felt that he was weak, was simple and could not help a sensation of fear and misery. An expression of being lost, as if dreaming, came over him too, and he did not answer when Henrietta asked him:

'To-morrow, shall I make a seed-cake again?'

And he was silent because he did not know that she had spoken.

II

Israel Rentshaw's life had been itself simple and pathetic. As a boy he had begun work at six, so that the memory of his childhood was limited and indistinct; until the age of thirty, as a ploughman, he

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had periods of being dissolute without being depraved, had got mildly drunk perhaps once a week. At all the fairs and holidays for ten miles round had got hopelessly drunk, abusive and rowdy, and had always to be taken home in a wagon or wheelbarrow. At thirty his father died, unexpectedly leaving him a hundred pounds, though he had all his life been looked upon as a poor man too. And with this hundred pounds Israel had rented land, bought a horse, got married and begun as a small farmer. Ever since he had found himself facing difficulties, acting on the wrong advice, neglecting opportunities. He owned pasture-land, grew all kinds of corn and root-crops. He kept cows, pigs and two horses, and in July and September hired one, or perhaps two men for hay-time and harvest. Yet nothing for any length of time seemed to have gone smoothly and without disaster. Cows had died, two horses had once to be shot within a fortnight, and only the previous summer swine-fever had come for the second time and all his store-pigs, sows and even a fresh litter of young, had had to be destroyed. All his fresh schemes of cultivation, his measures for the prevention of disease, his experiments with fruit never seemed to come to anything either. His wife was dead; he had no sons. The struggle, the loneliness and poverty had for ten years been growing worse. Barns were coming down, his stock was wretched, the methods he used were out-of-date – everything revealed ineffectuality and decay. He himself was a

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man of seventy, an old man. Only the orchard, whether in summer or autumn or bursting in blossom, gave an impression of the splendid prosperity Israel had once imagined, worked for, and never had.

As he sat looking into the fire, clasping and unclasping his hands, sharp pangs of disappointment and regret went through him. Then he thought, but with another kind of pang, of his wife, her strict country face, her shrewd manner, whose philosophy had seemed to be 'Never spend a half-penny when a farthing will do,' but who also, at the same time, had been discerning, kind-hearted, diligent and understanding.

Israel, for some reason or other, always thought of her on quarter-days. He thought of her distantly, simply, as if half-afraid of her. Now, at the receipt of this letter, he wished for her with a close, desperate longing that again was a pang.

He kept knitting his brows, blinking, and asking himself: 'What would she have done about this?' All the time he felt weary. 'Why should this have to come? Why should it?' he asked. And he would keep glancing at Henrietta, feeling that if she knew of the letter she would at once say: 'It's God's will we should give up at last. Now we can go and live in the village and not slave any more.' And such a speedy decision, such a sudden break with the land he had farmed for forty years he did not wish for, and he felt he could not tell her of the letter.

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His restlessness grew. He got up, and about the kitchen began to walk softly, in his stockinged feet. Henrietta said: 'What's the matter? Why don't you sit still?' But he only grunted in reply that he could not sit still.

Suddenly he had a desire to leave her and be alone. And after being silent a moment or two he took a candle, lit it and holding it before him, went upstairs. The stairs were wooden and bare and creaked like new boots. It was dark, the candle-flame spluttered grease and gave a bad, flickering light. Dampness shone on the walls and every now and then wind came and shook the window-panes violently. At the end of the landing a door had become unlatched and was clanging violently.

The room Israel entered was cold and dismal, smelling faintly of something ripe, damp and rotting. When he set down the candle, shadows spread themselves like the tail-feathers of a huge bird over some rickety chairs, an old bureau, a litter of untidy papers and a few heaps of peas and beans strewn in the corner to dry. From the walls fell on him cold, unmoved stares from the portraits of his relations, his wife, of his wedding group and of himself dressed stiffly, without his beard, in middle age. Every one in these photographs, even himself, looked bored and stupid, and he did not look at them.

Sitting down he pondered for a long time over some papers. Outside the wind howled in the lattices, barns and trees, and far off, in the woods and

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copses, seemed to whine like a dog. And all the time he thought: 'If I don't buy the land what will happen, where shall we be?' And one moment he thought he would buy, then another that he would not. The cold sobbing of the wind made the thought of purchase appear warm and acceptable. Then with his daughter's repeated words: 'Don't let's slave any more, let's leave it,' returning to him, he would remind himself of four bad harvests, a cow that had died and the visitation of swine-fever the previous year, and of the unending struggle they had to meet such things and yet still live.

The worst of these thoughts was that he must give up his land, go to live in the village and end his days as an odd labourer or even as a grave-digger or pensioner. He remembered the days when he had been strong, able to hoe, plough, and reap tirelessly, sit up all night with sick cattle and begin work again at daybreak. And he felt that as he had obeyed some force then, so he must offer no resistance to it now, but must work, scheme and exist as he had always done.

He turned over the papers with a sad, reflective expression. Now the shock of the letter did not produce restlessness of thought but only a soft, lingering ache, as if he remembered how some one had hurt him long ago. The effect of this was to make him more and more loath to face the problem of whether to buy his forty acres from the Duchy or not. He felt the need for strength, but every moment was con-

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scious of retreating a little farther away from the problem, as if succumbing to his own weakness. At last he found himself counting the days to the date of the sale, then to the other date, March 22nd. To the sale it needed twenty-six days, so that if he wished to buy he must decide in twenty-one. And suddenly the space of three whole weeks seemed to him so ample as to give him time to review every point of issue, even take outside advice and to do the thing that was most agreeable and advantageous.

The wind kept howling as he sat there. Gradually from a matter of complexity he found he had reduced everything to the simplest of terms. And this suited him, not because he was constantly and deliberately avoiding difficulties, but because he was by nature simple and trustful. And as he gathered his papers into a heap, took the candle and descended the damp, creaking stairs again, he would think over and over again:

‘To-morrow will do.’

And in the air he thought he still detected the sharpness of snow.

III

Israel, on rising next morning, did not think of the letter. In the night snow had fallen and the thought that he had foretold this filled him with an odd satisfaction. He felt this on first gazing out at the endless stretches of white fields, at the gates, sheep-troughs, hedges and woods half-buried in snow, and

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the trees on which the snow hung like a blossom, delicate but heavy, waiting to fall.

Now everything, even the wretched barns, stacks, piles of wood and carts, looked dignified and beautiful. There was a strange stillness. The pond and the sky were of the same sombre grey. In the yard sparrows and starlings hopped noisily to and fro looking for something to eat. As Israel returned from milking all the birds flew into the orchard and sat in the trees chattering at him.

He stood watching them, grew cold and then went in for breakfast.

At breakfast he remarked:

'The wind must have dropped with the snow. It must have done – everywhere's quiet and as it should be. Yes, there's not a thing out of place. I never woke at all.'

He remembered how soundly he had slept and began to eat. Silence fell. He kept sniffing and all the time drew in the smell of cooked bacon, warmth, sourness and felt happy. Then suddenly Henrietta said:

'All the same, there's a tree down in the orchard.'

He started. 'In the orchard? What sort, where?' he asked.

'Not a fruit-tree – a big one, an elm,' she said.

'I've been out, I never saw it!'

'You stood watching it!'

'I never saw it. They were birds I was watching.'

Feeling half-ashamed he suddenly rose, went to

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the window and gazed out. Everywhere was still, the trees never stirred, only the birds still hopped to and fro, like black marionettes, in the snow. In parts the snow had taken the form of great jagged breakers. Elsewhere long graceful drifts stretched. In the orchard the fruit-trees, all lined with snow, were already letting fall soft transparent flakes. Beyond them Israel saw the tree which had fallen and lay like some white, prostrate bird with frozen wings.

And he said: 'Yes, right enough, that's an elm.'

While saying this he felt his heart grow heavier. The loss of even a tree made him feel resentful, yet helpless, as if cheated of something.

He went back to the table, shook his head and said: 'It's a pity,' in a slow, meditative voice.

Then suddenly he began to think of the letter and the tree together. It seemed to him that if the fall of a tree filled him with a sense of sadness and loss, such a sensation could only be multiplied endlessly if he were to give up his land. And immediately he longed desperately to pour into Henrietta's face appeals for her help and understanding. But he did not do so, did not even look at her. The room grew silent and as he sat there snow began to melt in soft, shining rivers of silver on the window. Beyond this in the sky soft-edged limpid pools of light were beginning to come.

Henrietta began clearing the table. But he did not move and felt only a desire to sit still, to watch the

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snow and consider calmly how to act and to gather the courage to act.

But as she cleared away the cups and saucers, Henrietta said:

‘The roof of the hen-house has fallen in. It’s the snow. You might get a pole and prop it up. Only mind, be careful what you’re doing.’

‘I’ll see to it,’ he said.

But he spoke with faint weariness, with the habitual reluctance of a man accustomed to put off things from day to day.

IV

A thaw set in and within two days the meadows were blank sheets of water, the trees drenched and black and Israel’s fields drab patches of green and brown again. When this happened Henrietta said to him:

‘Soon you ought to begin sawing the smaller arms of that tree. We could do with that.’

But she looked at him as if she meant: ‘We could do without it. Give it up – remember you’re seventy.’

But he said nothing.

After a few delays, however, he went to a barn, found a saw and chopper and walked down to the orchard. Now only patches of snow remained, shining here and there like big mushrooms in the sheltered spots. Blue lakes of changing shape swam about the sky. The wind smelt of a soft dampness

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and, though the sun was not shining, there was a pale tranquil light, and everything, the grass, the hedges, the trees, and especially as it seemed, the fallen tree, glistened faintly with moisture.

Israel stood still and looked at the tree. Among the branches a pigeon's nest was interwoven and he remembered that in summer leaves had concealed this but that the murmur of the pigeons had not been hushed at all.

He stood still for a long time. At last, when he took off his coat, he felt himself shiver. Sawing did not warm him either. And gradually the sawdust he made began to flutter down intermittently and feebly. The drone of the saw lessened as well. Then suddenly the sawdust, the saw itself and his whole body ceased moving.

For a minute he held himself arrested. His heart seemed as if gripped by a large, freezing hand. His forehead paled and gave out big drops of wet moisture. A haze floated before his eyes.

He tried to resist all these things with an odd sort of determination, biting his lips and shaking his head like a dog. And it seemed that after a moment or two the freezing at his heart retreated. The mist cleared and even far-off objects like copses, the floods in the meadows, the church and the clouds became normally clear, and only peculiar, alternate fits of shivering and warmth seized him.

For the past five or six years of his life Israel had suffered from something which could be called

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neither a sickness nor a disease. And this was that, as now, the surrounding tissues of his heart would suddenly contract, sap his strength and leave him exhausted. On previous occasions Israel had drunk brandy for these fits and relief had come. Now he walked slowly to the house, waited till Henrietta was out of sight and moving furtively drank brandy again. As before the pain vanished, the cold hand was withdrawn completely from his heart. The only difference was that to do this needed a little more brandy than before.

Israel never connected one of these attacks with either advancing age, infirmity or strain. But during the attacks themselves he would, every time, find himself recalling Henrietta's words: 'Give it up, don't slave any more.' But when they had passed the thought of giving up his land never returned to him.

This time, however, the letter, Henrietta's anxious insistence on the previous day and the loss of the tree brought on the trouble afresh. Some detail such as a bad deal or the death of a cow would make him think, 'She is right, we get no profit, we've slaved long enough and it will have to come.' Yet though he thought this, he felt that whatever decision he made must unfold gradually, like summer or a flower. So his thoughts were dull, half-hearted and came to nothing.

And as he lay in bed that night, rain began to fall, desultorily at first, then with a steady splashing

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sound. And while listening to it he thought of the fallen tree, Henrietta's soft face and her appeal to him, the attack at his heart that morning, and what he should do with all the sawdust lying under the tree. When he went to sleep he had intermittent dreams of the letter and repeated phrases of it, and the names of the solicitors who had sent it. But on waking up he did not consider it at all.

V

One Sunday morning, when only three days remained in which to act, he fed his pigs and then, telling Henrietta where he was going, walked down through the village to the river. Larks were singing in the pale, tranquil light of spring, and over everything, from one green edge of the horizon to another, a fresher loveliness seemed to have fallen.

In the village people were on their way to church, the bright hats of the women peeping out like flower-buds at unexpected places. As the street turned down to the river and the houses became older, more huddled and slanting, the bells for church began ringing. Sometimes gay, sometimes solemn, the sound followed him all the way to the river, on the banks of which the willows were masses of silvery blossom, and grew softer as he drew farther and farther away.

Then as he stood on the bridge it seemed to him the bells ceased altogether. Then in the silence he

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fancied he heard them again, thinking how high and soft they were. But suddenly he became aware that the sound he heard was not of the bells but of a strange singing inside his head.

All the things at which he had gazed with such satisfaction and joy, the larks, the green meadows and the reflections in the water of the satin willows, the hawthorn bushes, the young reeds and the sky and the slow-gliding river itself, became suddenly unsteady and dim.

In a moment his breath became stifled, his brow clammy, and swaying forward in a tumbling stagger, it seemed to him that he was falling endlessly downwards, never stopping. For what seemed a long time with white features and strained lungs he hung over his own ghastly reflection in the water.

Struggling back up the long slope to the village, regaining his strength in frequent pauses and then losing it all in a second or two, he saw everything as in a sickly dream.

And when the figure of a man approached, took his hand and spoke to him, it too was blurred and its voice remote.

‘What’s the matter with you? You look like death – what you been doing?’

‘I’m all right,’ he tried to protest.

‘Look as if you’d been scared. What’s amiss? This won’t do, you’ll go wrong way.’

The figure took his arm and began leading him up towards the village. Still it seemed to Israel that it

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was a strange and ephemeral figure belonging not to life but half to sickness, half to death.

'Don't you know me?' he was asked.

He only shook his head.

'It's Sam Houghton. You know Sam!'

Again he shook his head and then murmured faintly:

'Sam, is it? Sam Houghton? Take me and get some brandy.'

In the inn and afterwards, as he stood blinking at the sunshine in the village street, he kept impressing upon the other:

'Don't say anything. Don't breathe a word. Henrietta, you understand – you'll frighten her, she'll be upset.'

In the afternoon he slept, but it was a poor, pitiful sleep. At the end of it, sitting up, he thought he heard voices, and after listening a moment it seemed to him they were children's voices. Then he came out and saw Henrietta selling milk to three children at the door.

He heard these words:

'And please how is Mister Rentshaw?'

'He's all right. Why? He's asleep,' said Henrietta.

'Because my father wants to know, because this morning he wasn't well.'

'Who wasn't well?'

'Your dad.'

'Where?'

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'Down by the river, I reckon.' And another child broke in: 'Yes, down by the river it was, I heard my dad telling my mother so.'

And suddenly, hearing all this, Israel went back and sat down again, hating deeply and unreasonably everybody and everything, especially Henrietta, Sam Houghton and his children, despising himself for being ill and failing to keep it secret, loathing the thought of explanations, lies and compromises with Henrietta, and then when some unsatisfactory explanation had been given her, shrinking from her close, mistrustful looks until he felt an aversion for her, just as he had begun to feel, for the first time, an aversion for his wretched land, his thin, worn horses, the grotesque-looking barns smelling of damp and rottenness and for the pond into which the poplars had all his life stood endlessly looking and whispering.

VI

One Sunday it was Henrietta's birthday and at dinner there was a fowl with white sauce, bread stuffing, potatoes and a plum-pudding Henrietta had kept from Christmas; and at tea-time pickled cherries, damson-cheese and a cake with caraway seeds.

But both at dinner and tea Israel felt no appetite and left pieces of fowl, plum-pudding and caraway cake on his plate. And Henrietta noticed all this and began to appeal to him:

'Think how long you've been at it. It's too much

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for you. You know yourself everything's poor, things are always going wrong. There's no profit. And you're seventy, you're not fit for it. Give it up -- pay one year's rent and give it up.'

Whether because of his sudden dislike for his land, his lack of appetite or his fear of illness he could not tell, but this appeal touched him. And he was silent. And then, after tea, Henrietta, to make it worse, began showing him accounts and notes she had kept, proving the dreariness and ineffectuality of their struggle beyond all doubt.

He did not know what to do. Each item of expenditure increased his misery and helplessness. He could not look into Henrietta's face.

But Henrietta looked at him and said: 'Sooner or later we shall have to give it up.'

There was a note of sadness in her voice too. And half against his will he murmured: 'Yes.'

By this time he did not mean to say, 'We will give up at once,' but to convey something like: 'I see how things are, I understand.'

Whether she understood this or not he did not know, but he suddenly could not bear to remain with her any longer and went out, gave his horses a brushing, turned out the cow, set up the pig-troughs to dry in the sun, doing all this with the odd resolution and care which comes after sadness, as a relief.

Next morning he went to the orchard and began once more sawing, chopping and stacking the little branches of the fallen elm. It was fine. Hazy shapes

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of blue floated in the sky, puffed by a soft, warm wind. By the house some daffodils in the grass kept nodding, as if going off to sleep. Up above fresh green buds would swing and nudge each other and the smoke from the house shape itself like children's curls.

The tree looked no longer like a bird, but a statue which had fallen and smashed itself, face to earth. To Israel the labour of sawing up the wood was already tedious and fatiguing. The sound of the saw, a drone sometimes sharp, then low and mournful, became hard to bear. And then even the sound of larks singing, of the wind bearing the voices of sheep, cows and men over the hill, became sharp too and seemed to penetrate his head, multiply and set up others with no meaning to them. When he stood still an odd whistling in his ears began again, sometimes like an echo of the saw, and then softer and deeper, like the moan of a thresher far away.

Now he stood still more often, watching the oddest things. On the river, below, puffing dark smoke, a barge appeared, drawn against the stream. Before it vanished nearly half an hour passed, yet he watched solemnly and without moving, the way it turned each bend, negotiated a bridge and pulled itself out of sight at last, and when this had gone he could not resist gazing with an expression of soft, abstract longing at the shining, empty stream, the bank fringed with willows and dark green reeds. And as he did

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this he remembered how as a boy he had in winter skated on the frozen marshes and in summer bathed there, chased otters and voles, and caught eels before it was dawn.

Then suddenly the thought of the letter returned and he remembered that he must make an answer to it before night. And he began to go about repeating odd phrases of it, until some strange awful additional ache was formed in his head.

And at dinner and later in the afternoon Henrietta began to say again: 'Do give it up – you must live,' until this became an ache too.

Now his trouble was not what he must do but only that he must gain courage and do it. And as evening approached and dusk began to fall like the bluish shadow of an enormous leaf unfolding itself overhead, restlessness seized him. He began to wander about the kitchen, looking needlessly in cupboards and drawers, to make purposeless journeys to the barns, taking with him a candle and peering at the horses, the cow, and the hens blinking solemnly at him in the candlelight. And it was as if he were taking a last desperate look at these things before doing the thing which he knew would take them from him.

He was not conscious of being unhappy or un-nerved. Only an odd feeling of dread possessed him, such as if he were about to cause himself a physical injury without knowing how much harm or how much good would follow.

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At last he found himself arguing thus: 'If I tell Henrietta, she will write the letter. Why haven't I told her before?' And he longed so deeply for her guidance that he knew he must tell her.

Going into the kitchen he found the letter, opened it tremblingly and spread it before her. He fully expected her to rebuke him with expressions like 'Why didn't you tell me before? How silly you get!' but having read the letter Henrietta's eyes only seemed to shine oddly through her spectacles, and the way she touched her hair, fingered the letter and looked at him seemed to suggest only a sort of shy, unexpected relief.

He saw, however, that she was waiting for him to speak. So he said, a little huskily:

'Write a letter saying - we'll let things go, that's all. Yes, that'll do.'

He sat down meekly and with some difficulty to wait until she had finished. He heard the laborious scratch of the pen, the rustle of paper, her breathing and the sound of the clock. There seemed to pass a long hush. Then Henrietta's dress swished, she rose and said:

'There it is. That's finished. And thank God.'

She folded the letter and with a touch in which he felt there to be thankfulness and joy, stroked her hand backwards and forwards across his hair. Then she stopped, and immediately it seemed to him that from henceforth he was a man alone, set apart, simply to await the climax of a certain destiny.

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VII

It was morning. Israel had done the usual things: lighted a fire, milked his cow and turned her out to graze, unbolted the hens and fed his three sows. At breakfast Henrietta, as if nothing unusual had happened, said:

'I've told you already – get a pole and prop the roof of the hen-house up. Any day it might fall down.'

He only nodded and afterwards went to the hen-house just to see if the corrugated iron roof had sunken. He found it very low. Then he remembered it had happened in the snow-storm and that Henrietta had been telling him of it ever since.

When he started for the copse a little later sunshine flooded everything, the ground was soft and springy, and all over the hill dandelions, celandines and daisies were looking at the sun with tiny yellow and white eyes. When nearly half-way up the hill, he remembered his axe and had to return for it.

Going back he hurried more than usual and broke into a sweat. In the copse, while looking for a young sapling to cut down, he suddenly felt tired and sat down on a fallen trunk. Through the trees he watched the river coiling through the meadows, the bluish smoke curling over the village, his white house among the trees. As he sat there Henrietta appeared, hung out some washing in the orchard and then

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vanished. In an odd way he recognized his shirt on the line. And at this he was filled with a strange pleasure and began smiling to himself.

Soon afterwards he got to his feet and began to look once again for a sapling. There were saplings of ash, beech, elm and fir in the copse. Now and then he stopped and shook one. Frightened by the noise blackbirds would charge out and, screeching, vanish into undergrowth again.

In the heart of the copse Israel came suddenly on a tall young fir-tree, standing alone. The air was still but this tree swayed its head lightly and proudly. Some trees, like the hawthorn and elm, were already in leaf. The blackthorn was still in blossom. The rest of the copse seemed asleep. But this tree seemed neither waking nor sleeping.

Israel ran a hand up its trunk and calculated its height. It was tall but the trunk was slender and strong and of the right thickness. He laid down the axe, took off his coat, and picked up the axe again, and stood looking at the tree.

Then suddenly he dropped the axe, clutched at his heart and grew pale. All this happened suddenly, as if he were trying to seize something before it seized him. But from his pallor, his shrunken features, his difficult breathing and doubled body it was plain it had come too swiftly. He sank to his knees, lay half on his side and clutched himself strongly. But his strength seemed to do nothing but squeeze out of him a deathly perspiration. Yet he kept up this

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clutching, as though to wring himself dry, and sank all the time lower and lower.

There suddenly crossed his mind the thought: 'I shall never get up again.'

He struggled to get up. He was like the weight at the end of a stick. Again he thought: 'I shall never get up, I shall never get up.' His struggles became desperate. All of a sudden he ceased struggling, fell, and lay stretched on the ground.

Some time passed. The fir-tree, the birds and all the trees kept still. On the dark, loamy earth Israel's head rolled gently to and fro like a ball of paper in a wind, then became still too.

The thought that he would not rise again became separated from him by a chasm of blackness. This blackness revolved and in revolving blew upon him draughts of a ghastly dampness. And the purpose of all his struggles, mental or otherwise, became only to avoid or stop this. Nothing else was visible, audible or sensible to him.

Once the thought raced by: 'What if I do die here? Does anyone know where I have come? Would they find me?'

At this thought, for no reason at all, a red ball he used to play with as a child rolled past in the darkness. He made efforts to catch it. But these efforts, like all his other struggles, though strenuous, were futile and pathetic, and the ball vanished.

After this he felt twice his previous misery. Then the strange singing he had aways connected with

DAY'S END

these attacks began in his head again. And simultaneously with this a warm dribble of moisture ran from his lips.

He coughed. This was consciousness. Little by little the revolving darkness ceased. A still darkness, in which he remembered what had happened, took its place. Finally he conquered this also, and opening his eyes, saw the fir-tree, the axe, the undergrowth, the dark earth dotted a little way off with primrose leaves and primrose buds.

He staggered on rising. To him the sunshine was colder and more pitiless than the darkness had been. He suffered pain merely in walking from tree to tree and constantly shivered. Without looking at the half-hewn birch he took up the chopper and then, when out of the copse, let it fall into the grass and did not pick it up again.

He kept shuddering. The meadows, the green corn-fields, the fallow land and the trees now and then swirled sickeningly, like a roundabout. He felt old and kept asking himself: 'How old am I? What am I doing?'

He never answered these questions, even though, like every sensation, the shuddering, the sickness, the fear of death in the wood, they were repeated again and again.

This was his worst attack. Waiting till Henrietta had gone for some purpose into the orchard he crept into the house and then drank brandy heavily from the bottle in the kitchen. And suddenly without

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warning he remembered it needed thirteen days to the sale of the land.

VIII

Nearly a week passed. Israel went about looking older. Now and then he thought of the sale of his land. Yet still he felt that the worst might not come. Nevertheless he caught himself unconsciously looking forward to the date of the sale, and his feeling of being a man set apart to await a fixed event remained with him. He began to feel older.

Yet every day he rose as usual, did his milking, feeding and cleaning, and then went into the fields. In the fields he rolled his young wheat, planted potatoes, drilled roots and bush-harrowed his grass. All these things he tried to do consistently and well. At the same time he did them without spirit, did them badly, and yet did not know he was doing them badly.

One morning Henrietta implored him: 'Go and get the pole for the hen-roof. It'll fall down. There'll be such a mess.' She looked at him with a trace of weariness. 'How many times have I asked you? Do go.'

'I'll go.'

But he did not go. He did not even trouble to look for the axe in the grass.

A succession of warm spring days came. The grass even steamed faintly in the sunshine. Israel heard the cuckoo, at first rarely, then every day, and in the

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afternoons the walls of the house grew quite hot and glaring. The cherry-trees began to come into blossom, and by the time the cherry petals had begun to fall, the pear-trees and apple-trees were in full bloom.

And the thought began to grow in Israel's mind: 'Now the warm days have come I shan't have these attacks. I shall be all right.'

For a week there was no attack. Then one morning after he had been working at the fallen tree in the orchard there was a terrible one.

He was in the kitchen. Darkness enveloped him completely, he reeled and staggered. The sound of this brought in Henrietta. There was a confused flutter of skirts and the words: 'What has happened? what has happened?'

He was sitting huddled in a chair. In the heart of that terrible and ghastly darkness he made no answer.

She began to run hither and thither, bringing first water, then towels, then climbing to the cupboard for the brandy bottle. All the time she kept murmuring to herself: 'I told him how it would be, I told him!'

The brandy bottle was empty. She did not understand this.

To Israel all her efforts were only sounds in the darkness. His head sang with echoes. He began presently to murmur: 'Leave me alone, leave me alone!'

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The echoes became more insistent.

'Leave me alone! I am all right!' He coughed.

But in his heart he was thinking: 'She will find out about the brandy bottle. She'll know everything.'

Now she directed her murmurs to him, aloud:

'I told you how it would be. I told you, I told you.'

Had she told him? He could not remember because of the darkness, the damp and cold, because he was more wretched than he had ever been. Tears came into his eyes. He longed desperately for the days when he had had no such wretchedness. He longed for those days more and more. Outside birds were in song, the sun lit up the blossom, but he felt for a long time cold and unhappy. And as time went past he longed simply to do something to make Henrietta happy again.

And just before evening he conceived the idea of going to the copse and bringing back the fir-tree. Henrietta struggled with him, said, 'You can't go, you can't go!' and began to cry. But he only shouted: 'The fir-tree, the fir-tree! You want it, don't you?'

She had to seize his shoulders and force him into a chair. 'You're not well,' she whispered. 'Stay here.'

He understood what this meant. Yet all that night and all the next day he thought only of where to find the lost axe, of going to the copse again, and bringing home the fir-tree.

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IX

Each day, now, Israel was conscious of Henrietta observing him with troubled eyes. But more than anything he was conscious of two things which now he never separated – illness and the approaching sale. The thought of the sale would bring on a feeling of faintness, and if he felt ill without thinking of it, not a minute would pass before it began to trouble him.

Now he passed through long periods of inactivity through sheer weakness of body and spirit. He complained of the sun on his head. When showers came he stood at the door, watched them and did not go out again until the sky cleared. He played with the cat, stared moodily at the river, and walked to and from the orchard endlessly, carrying a log of wood under each arm. And everywhere he was conscious of dreading these two afflictions – illness and the surrender of his land.

And whenever she saw him go out Henrietta asked: 'Where are you off to?'

If he said 'To the stable' or 'To fetch some straw' it was all right, but if he said 'Down to saw a little more off that tree' or 'To draw water' she would clutch his coat and beg him not to go. This would produce a feeling of irritation, and he would be angry. And irritation and anger began to upset him.

The day of the sale arrived. The sale was to be held

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at the offices of some auctioneers ten miles off. It was a fine morning, distance was sharp and bright and the sky a soft transparent blue. In the orchard the trees were rosy now and others shed petals in little gusts, as if they shook with laughter.

Israel wished to harness his oldest nag, drive the ten miles and be present at the sale. He even got the horse ready and sat polishing the harness with oil in the sunshine. Then Henrietta happened to catch sight of him and came to ask:

‘What are you cleaning harness for? Where are you going?’

He felt irritated at once and said: ‘Never do you mind.’

Then, catching sight of her worried expression, he repented and said simply:

‘I thought of driving over to that sale.’

She picked up the oil.

‘But you can’t go, it’s too far,’ she said. ‘Besides, whatever happens at the sale we shall hear all about. It’ll be in the papers,’ she impressed on him.

She spoke plaintively, so that he felt older and yet like a child; and at once he understood an expression he had heard applied to old men, the expression of ‘second childhood.’ And he was suddenly angry, dropped the harness, and hobbled off into the house.

She followed him. ‘Listen to me, don’t put yourself out,’ she kept saying.

Then he expressed his anger: ‘You treat me like a new-born baby!’

DAR'S END

'But if anything happened – think of that. Think if you had an attack.'

He gazed at her with deep, pale-blue eyes, fuming silently at her for one moment longer. Then he ceased. Yes, supposing he had an attack, on the roadside, in that rocking old cart, with only the old nag there? He might fall, sink down and never get up again. Yes, it might happen. And this would bring about, he knew, a position of misery and hardship for her. So he would not go, how could he?

And he said: 'I expect I shan't have to go,' thinking he would let her see that he did not give in easily.

'It'll be all the better for you here,' she said.

'Give me the oil, let me finish the harness, then,' he asked.

He could see that she did not trust him. But she gave him the oil and he went back, nursing this affliction, to where he had been sitting in the shelter of the front wall of the house. He was conscious of moving more than ever like an old man. He sat down again, the harness on his knees. The bench on which he sat, the whitewashed wall and the earth under him were quite warm. Birds were singing, the river sparkled like a necklace stretched across the green meadows. At intervals the cuckoo called, now near, now far, moving from tree to tree. There was a smell of fresh earth and grass, then of harness-oil and manure, then borne along faintly yet more lastingly than any, the scent of all the trees in the orchard.

And looking up from time to time Israel sat and

DAY'S END

dreamily gazed at all this. He thought how splendid everything looked: the trees, the meadows, the water, the grazing cattle, the young crops, the village and the woods behind. And especially it seemed that he had never seen the orchard so lovely, so full of promise. Underneath all the trees seemed to have formed snowdrifts, and sometimes when a faint wind stirred among them this snow shimmered and looked pink.

And suddenly he thought: 'Perhaps by now this is nothing to me. It's sold already, perhaps.'

Sadness seemed to strike him in the breast. He felt faint and polished the harness half-heartedly, staring into the distance.

'Perhaps it doesn't belong to me,' he kept thinking.

And as before, with the thought of the sale came the thought of illness. Israel held himself rigid and for a moment tried to think not of illness or eviction but only muse on the future. And then he made the bitter discovery that illness and death were the future.

And suddenly the sunny meadows, the blooming of spring, the crops and the cherry-trees with their setting fruit meant nothing to him. The harness, though he went on polishing it for a long time, meant nothing either.

And from that moment onwards he began to have recurring spasms when he experienced nothing but fear of death.

DAY'S END

x

Two mornings later Henrietta began to act strangely towards him. Time after time she would stop suddenly, stare at him, open her mouth as if to say something and then desist. He grew impatient with her.

'What's the matter with you? Why do you keep staring?' he shouted suddenly.

She was kneading dough: he could not see her face. He just heard a whisper:

'Nothing.'

And this angered him. He began to shout at the top of his voice: 'What is it! what's the matter?'

'Don't shout, father.'

He lowered his voice, began to speak, then stopped. A thought had struck him. This thought, when formed into words, nearly choked him. But he repeated it twice in a whisper:

'It's been sold, hasn't it? It's been sold?'

Henrietta dropped her eyes. A silence fell. He was conscious of only her hands thudding very softly in the dough. Then again he said:

'It's been sold, hasn't it?'

And he knew by the second drop of her eyes and the renewed silence that the farm had been sold. To whom and for how much it had been sold it was not necessary to ask. He only felt angry and raised his voice:

'We're to go, I expect?'

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'Don't fret yourself.'

'We're to go, I expect?' he shouted.

Then suddenly he saw that Henrietta's lashes were wet. A tear directly afterwards bounded off her hand into the dough. And the sight of this single tear was too much for him. He suddenly felt wretched, listless, aspiring towards nothing, possessing not even a desire to stand still, but standing still because it seemed the nearest approach to nothing. And then, happening to glance up, he caught sight of his face in the glass. It appeared haggard, nearly grey against the red neckerchief, its eyes sunken and of no definite colour. Suddenly he remembered how Sam Houghton had seen a change in him. And now he himself saw this change, without fear, without delusion. And all he longed for was one moment in which to see himself as he had been before it – red in the face, with keen, fresh eyes and a look of hardiness even about his white hair. But he understood that it would not come, just as he understood no repeal of the order of eviction would come. And against either he had not the strength to protest. He sat in his chair all afternoon, his fleshy lips hung apart, his hands trembling on the arms of the chair, and when Henrietta came near him he muttered only:

'Leave me alone! For God's sake go away!'

XI

In the dead of night Israel woke up with a start,

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muttering these same words: 'Let me alone! Leave me in peace.'

The blinds were drawn, the room was in total darkness. Yet as he lay stretched on his back he fancied he could see roving shapes on the ceiling, then on the walls, and lastly over the bed. It was to these shapes he thought he must have been crying: 'Let me alone! For God's sake go away.'

In the first few moments between the end of the dream and full wakefulness, he thought frantically: 'Why is it so dark, can I be dead? Where am I?'

Gradually he came to complete consciousness. Some one had left a door open and he heard a clock distinctly ticking downstairs. He lay and recalled some fragments of a horrible dream in which a whole forest of trees had been falling upon him. The memory of this dream was itself terrible. Now the air was sultry, there was a scent of blossoming trees. Now and then cocks crowed. What time it was he did not know. He lay listening for an hour to strike. Nothing struck, however, and he felt himself grow more restless and wakeful.

His head was full of thoughts; each one of which was clear, strong, yet strange and endlessly repeated. And this form of repetition made a sort of pattern of thought, thus:

'Sales by private deed. . . . It's sold, isn't it, it's sold? . . . Yes, I will finish cutting it down. . . . I will finish it to-morrow. . . . We're to go, I expect? . . . When shall we go? . . . Yes, to-morrow. . . .

DAY'S END

Leave me alone, I will finish it to-morrow! I'll finish it!

Then two voices began to hold a conversation in his head:

'Is it true it's been sold?'

'I expect so.'

'She didn't say so.'

'I know it has.' His heart grew heavy at this.

'Have you provided for Henrietta?'

'She will have everything.'

'What is there?'

'I don't know.'

And so he brought himself to a position where he considered the position, that is illness, eviction and death, calmly and unselfishly. Yet it was a troubled position. Each moment gave birth to this question:

'What is there?'

And the same answer:

'I don't know.'

After a little he felt that he must know. He got out of bed in the darkness, put on some stockings, opened the door and stepped out. Outside it was darker still. Henrietta slept at the end of the landing. He listened. Nothing more than the clock ticking in the stillness below reached him. Moving again he tried not to shuffle or breathe, and held his nightshirt against his legs.

In the room which held the old bureau, the drying seeds and melancholy photographs he found a candle, lit it carefully and set it down. In this room

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there were no curtains and he could look out on a bluish sky with stars, the orchard which looked as if planted with big, white flowers, the dark land beyond, and the darker meadows through which the river was running, and darkest of all the woods against the sky. In the room there was the same air of dampness, the smell of grease and dust. And in a stillness which seemed afraid of itself Israel sat down with care.

He began with equal care to unlock drawers, take out papers and read through them. Here were details, often in Henrietta's handwriting, of sales and dealings, the Government and Local Authority orders relating to swine-fever, particulars of lime, the depth of the pit, the correct method of burial, the statement of compensation he had received, long envelopes with official marks on them; sealing-wax, old pens and string; dust that rose and settled elsewhere in a brownish bloom. The smell he most disliked, that of old papers, mould, decay and dust, escaped from everything. There would be stillness, then a rustle of papers, then stillness again. And all the time he would think how distasteful and unnecessary all accounts and papers were.

He looked up at the dark sky. Everything had a still dignified and beautiful appearance. In the candle-light his face was yellow and looked ill. Yet he did not feel either ill, sleepy or depressed.

As soon as he became inactive questions assailed him again.

DAR'S END

'Have you provided for Henrietta? How much is there?'

'There should be a hundred and fifteen pounds,' he thought in answer to this.

From the bottom of the bureau he took out a bag. A hundred and fifteen pounds – it was something. On such a sum he had first rented the farm. He felt an odd pleasure at the remembrance of this. Then suddenly it struck him that never since the death of his father had he possessed more than this sum. Often it had been less, but never more. And now, at the end of his life, it was still the same.

He emptied the money from its leather bag, spread it out in the candlelight and began to count it. At 'forty-two . . . forty-three,' he stopped to listen, and whether because of this break or not he found suddenly, at 'eighty-four . . . eighty-five' that the end of the notes had come. He thought at once: 'Eighty-five! There's some mistake. I've counted wrong. It can't be!'

He commenced to recount the notes and this time, though a chill had seized him and his fingers quivered, counted without a break. But still at eighty-five the notes ended. He pushed the candle brusquely further away from him and crouched over the bureau.

As he counted, his thin, greyish legs, protruding like bones from beneath his night-shirt, tottered; his hands could not move fast enough; his wet lips stuttered pathetically.

DAR'S END

And again and again the end of the notes would come at eighty-five, even at eighty-seven, but never more.

And each time he would tell himself, 'There's some mistake,' or 'Henrietta's kept some back, she has hidden it!'

Doubt, anger, fear, and then misery and dejection overcame him. When he had woken up in the darkness he had been afraid, like a child, of mysterious and menacing shapes of which the meaning was unknown. Now he was afraid of something realistic and undeniable.

'I have not provided for Henrietta, what have I been thinking about?'

He began to grope for something by which to justify this negligence, but only fell to abusing himself. 'You are an old fool! All this while you've lived there's nothing saved – now you're to come out and do God knows what to keep yourself alive.'

Alive! How long must this be! How long must he wait?

His hands were clammy and cold, draughts blew beneath his shirt. What was all this about death, why did he think of it now? In this room it was cold, silent; he was shut in, as if buried, with the records of his slovenly business, his failures and the calm, as if critical, portraits of his wife, his relatives and himself staring at him. What would his wife have thought, what would he himself as he was in that photograph, have thought of this old, shrunken and hopeless

DAI'S END

figure in nightshirt and stockings, in the candlelight? And again what would this figure think if it could see the figure of the future? And he imagined himself lying on the bed, shrunken and faded, the white hair and the white beard still, as he had heard it said, growing a little after death, but the rest of him, the soul of him, vanished, evaporated and forgotten.

His eyes fell on the money. Stroking his beard with damp fingers he kept asking himself: 'What mistake have I made?'

And then in this position of cold, weary despondency it seemed to him that all he had done or even tried to do was a mistake, his life was a mistake. He had worked hard but had managed everything badly. Twice his wheat had been blighted, his potatoes had had a disease, he lost two horses and swine-fever had visited him.

'I haven't done a thing, I haven't provided for Henrietta. I have lost twenty-five pounds and the farm. I'm worn out.'

He became conscious suddenly of the thought of illness lurking in the not far distance. He got up – he must go back to bed. What time was it? How long since he woke?

He swayed on his feet and the thought of illness came into the near distance. From this he felt himself shrink as from something cold and ghastly. Signs of what was about to happen were evident in an ominous shudder of the candle-flame, the reeling sky,

DAR'S END

the distorted faces looking out of the portraits on the walls.

He felt he must be sick. With equal certainty he felt that he must open the door, get back to bed and wait for the spasm to pass. Yet he did neither. Suddenly blackness, like all his former blacknesses, damp and revolving, came and enveloped him like a sack.

To struggle against this blackness Israel clutched the bureau, made a choking sound, looked with upturned, whitish eyes at the dark sky and the portraits on the walls, and then sank to his knees. His breathing became a rattle, and as in the orchard and under the birch-tree he was cold all over and could not lift his head.

Once more the red ball of his childhood rolled by; this time it seemed hot, though he never caught it, and only once came near it. And this was when it turned upon him like an animal when pursued, and attacked him. It struck his forehead and there, for the rest of his existence, in darkness or not, continued to burn a pain against which he kept crying appealingly, but in vain:

'Let me alone! Let me alone, for God's sake!'

These same words were on his lips when Henrietta found him in the morning. It was daylight when she found him, the sun was shining through the window and the candle was burning in the sunshine.

XII

It was evening. On the meadows, on the hillside,

DAR'S END

the orchard, the roofs and the spire, in the village, the sun was still shining. A gentle suffused light lay also over the pale walls, the ceiling, the red counterpane of the bed in which Israel lay waiting for death.

The sun was creeping across one corner of the room. All that Israel could see of nature was this sunshine, the heads of some tall poplars through the window, and the dim, blue sky of evening. And on each of these, in turn, his eyes came wearily to rest. His pale, naive-looking eyes wandered tirelessly.

It was silent. At length footsteps approached, and in a moment Henrietta, alone, came in. He turned his washed-out gaze upon her. She returned this stare by a look which it seemed to him said: 'Why didn't you listen to me?'

He turned away, thought feebly: 'Why must she look at me like that?' and then asked in a whisper:

'What day is it?'

'It's Sunday,' she answered.

'Why haven't you gone to church?'

There was no answer. Having listened for a long time, he asked himself: 'Why didn't she answer me?' or was it that she did answer but that he heard nothing?

It did not matter, he hated church. He fell to watching the sun on the walls again, playing with a button on his shirt and listening. Henrietta moved about the foot of the bed. Presently it seemed to him that he heard something, and he said:

DAY'S END

'Who's down there?'

'It's Timothy Cooper,' she said.

'The carpenter?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'What does he want?'

Towards the end of each conversation his voice and hearing grew perceptibly feebler, a blank came, and he lay fencing with the pain the ball had made when striking his head. Whenever the two faculties returned it seemed to him that he must at once ask some question. This time he asked:

'Who else is there?'

'Nobody else.'

'I heard somebody. Who's been?' he persisted.

She came to him, touched his hair, and said: 'You must keep quiet. Only Mark Summers has been, and Sep Thomas and his wife.'

'Why have they been?'

'They came to see you.'

'I don't want them.'

And he thought: 'When I was all right they never used to come. Nobody used to come. Now when it's no use they all come.'

All this he intended saying and with bitterness, but the words never reached his lips. Instead he watched the sun, the poplars, the pattern of Henrietta's pinafore and the sky. All this was done feebly, spiritlessly, only his eyes turning.

His breathing was heavy. He kept licking his lips. What thoughts he had were like these two movements

DAY'S END

—laboured and repeated again and again. Sometimes they were confused and were of fallen trees, bottles of brandy, letters, harness, a chopper and a silver-birch. Often they were meaningless.

One thought like the pain the scorching ball had made never went away. This was of the money he had got up and counted in the middle of the night. He came to think of this money as being more important, more agonizing than even the pain was. In his feeble manner he tried to reproach himself, kept failing, could not remember why he wished to be reproachful, and fretted because he could not remember.

At last he thought: 'I've left it long enough. I must do something.' He tried to catch sight of Henrietta's face at the window, and when he did catch sight of it found that she gazed at him absently, with full, shining eyes out of which she tried to smile. But her smile was pathetic and in vain. He felt sorry for her.

'She's blaming herself,' he thought. 'But no one's to blame. If I'd taken notice of her and been careful it wouldn't have been any different.'

At that very moment he recalled, for no reason at all, the fir-tree standing alone in the middle of the copse, and he muttered: 'That fir-tree — did anyone fetch it down?'

Henrietta came near, shaking her head, and he saw her eyes were shining with something wet. He gazed at her and repeated:

DAY'S END

‘That fir-tree?’

As soon as he said this he forgot it again. The thought of the money began to return, to obsess, to fret him, finally to hurt him. He longed to be set free from it as he had never wished to be freed from anything.

Yet he knew that it was inevitable, that he had brought it upon himself and now must face it. So he said, in a low voice:

‘There’s something in the next room. I want to look at it.’

He thought she would understand. He watched her depart, listened for the sounds of the door, her feet, the bureau-spring. How long she seemed! Just so long and dreary seemed the days and the nights through which he had lain there, his beard growing whiter and longer over the coverlet, and just so endlessly long seemed his life.

All his sufferings were condensed into the few moments during which, his eyes fixed on the gliding patches of sunshine, he waited for Henrietta’s return. At last, when he heard her hand on the latch of the door, he felt weakened by waiting, by a desire to cry, and by the fear of what she would say if she were to see him cry.

She came in. He watched her come – watched her bright pinafore, her red elbows, her troubled face, She was carrying something and in a moment he saw that she carried not what he had tried to ask for, the leather money-bag, but all the faded photo-

DAY'S END

graphs, with their faded frames and dusty cords, which had hung in that room, and that she was wiping them with the edge of her pinafore.

He tried to say something, but the thought of protesting was itself wearisome. He merely watched Henrietta sit down, put the photographs on the red coverlet, and scratch off the fly-marks with the end of her finger-nail. He tried to appear pleased and stretching out his hand, took up a red plush frame containing one of these portraits, and gazed at it.

Three men, one with a stupid, another with a bored, and a third with a fierce bristling expression, each of them wearing high-buttoned jackets and wide collars, gazed back at him. Something familiar in their looks stirred him. Yet by his blank, silent expression it was plain he recognized no one, and when Henrietta said: 'You know who that is, don't you?' he only shook his head, laid the photographs on his chest, and looked away.

Then Henrietta said:

'It's Uncle Joe, and Sam Houghton and Tom Chambers.'

He fancied he remembered now and nodded. Henrietta took away these photographs and replaced them by others. One, in a wooden frame, was of an elderly man, with gruff, expansive features partly hidden by a grey beard. Here the sense of familiarity was stronger, almost hurt him and made him screw up his brow so that the pain in the centre burned sharper.

DAR'S END

'It's Grandfather Rentshaw,' he heard Henrietta say.

'Yes. He's a Shetsoe man,' he said. 'I know him.'

He was filled with a sensation of softness, of something soothing and warm, as when he had sometimes looked at Henrietta with a desire for her compassion. When other photographs were put into his hands he was glad, whether they were women dressed in black and lace, men he had known, or wedding-groups grown dim, out-of-date and ridiculous. And while looking at them the mistake in the money gradually slipped his memory.

The sun receded across the walls. Shadows began to fill in the corners, the sky grew paler, and across the sky, just behind the poplars, suddenly sailed, like a ship, a cloud edged with pink and gold.

Israel held one photograph after another, filled all the time with a sense of softness and comfort. For the moment neither pain nor fear troubled him. At one time he had looked much into the future, but now when he felt that the future might end in a day, a minute or even a second, he wanted only to gaze into the past, through these portraits, and to hold on to the present by Henrietta's fingers.

Some photographs he would pick up twice or even three times. At one of these he shook his head and murmured: 'Who's that, wearing that big brooch?'

'That's mother.'

'Who?'

'It's mother. This is the same brooch.'

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He saw her finger the brooch on her dress, yet he did not understand. She looked dismayed, weary and ready to cry. He took the other photograph she held out to him.

It was of himself, he could see as much. What black hair, what a look of something solid and contented, what a buttonhole he had! And for a moment he reflected how he had loved flowers and in the early days had grown, in spring, daffodils, crocuses and primroses of different colours, and in summer larkspur, sunflowers, stocks, columbine and a lily which had had petals looking like drops of blood.

What had become of that lily? Where was it? And suddenly he wanted to ask Henrietta, but he only said:

'I'm thirsty. Some water.'

He was given some water – and so it seemed to him – that some one impersonal and unknown gave him the water. A confusion spread over him. He wanted to ask: 'Who are you? Why are you waiting? Why am I here?'

Instead he motioned feebly with his head and said: 'Leave me alone. Take them away.'

He closed his eyes and there was for a long time no sound, no pain either in his head or at his heart.

XIII

He awoke and opened his eyes, the lids of which felt sad and drooping. It was dark and he could no

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longer see the poplars. Right across the window stretched the Milky Way, in a sky of deep, sombre blue.

His head was full of dreams, uppermost of which was an odd dream of a money-bag tied to a tall arm of a fir-tree. His efforts to reach this bag were all in vain. He could not jump high enough, the bag would not shake off, and though he chopped constantly at the tree it never fell. And so he was miserable, agitated and in despair when he woke.

Suddenly in the darkness he said: 'Where are you?'

There was silence. He began to ask himself: 'Where is Henrietta? Why have I been left alone? How long have I been alone?'

To all this no answer came. Outside, except for the poplars sighing over the duck-pond, it was silent too. He lay listening, looking at the Milky Way.

He felt tired. How long was life to last? How long had it lasted? How long since he had lain here?

These questions were not answered either. His mind wandered off to thinking of the orchard, of the number of sacks in the corn-loft, of all the photographs Henrietta had showed him that day. A taste of frumenty, which he had not tasted since boyhood, came suddenly into his mouth, and this taste produced memories of the days when he had been a young man, had chased rats in the river, got drunk at fairs, and caught eels in summer before dawn.

He felt sad. In sadness he invariably reproached

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himself. Now he began to belittle his own life, feeling contemptuous in a feeble way of his lack of foresight, decision and achievement. He chided himself.

'I have done nothing. I have not provided for Henrietta.'

How this thought troubled him, how his brow ached with it. He saw once again the fir-tree with the money-bag in its branches. He thought of how he must shake it down and his frame trembled as if he were really shaking it.

His despair grew deeper. In his despair the Milky Way seemed to reel backwards and forwards across the bluish sky.

Suddenly Israel pulled himself upright, tried to push back the bedclothes, failed, tried once more, and succeeding at length, put his tottering legs to the floor.

As he tried to walk he too seemed to reel. He seemed to smell something burning, yet it was cold, he shivered and the latch of the door was like ice. In order to walk he had to strain his shoulders, his heart, his stomach, and most of all his legs, which did not seem to belong to him.

Droves of stars, like sheep, kept flocking before his eyes. When he reached the room where he had left the money a horrible greenness prevented his seeing anything. Then when this passed a clear, transparent blue came, like a summer sky, and he was able to see the window and the bureau with its littered papers and the leather-bag.

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The journey back was longer, more painful, more confused with shapes, colours and noises than the first had been. Yet at the back of all this was a dim sense of satisfaction that he could distinguish a shape from a colour, and the chest-of-drawers from the bed.

He lay down again, tired out. He shivered awfully, placed the money on his chest, and lay gazing at the sky. How far off it seemed, how many stars there were! And he thought: 'If I could lie here and count all the stars I should still live a long time.'

Yet if he was to go on living there would be no farm, no cows, no orchard to live for, and he thought of how unhappy he would be.

How unhappy he was! His feet were numbed and the money, which he had placed on his chest, was too heavy ever to be lifted away again, and heavy also were the spasms going through his heart and the pain where the ball had struck him.

Suddenly the ball rolled by again and with the ball came a smell of frumenty. Then both were gone.

The room seemed to grow darker. Farther and farther seemed to stretch away the sky, the Milky Way and the stars. For one instant Israel longed desperately for lines to catch eels with, for summer, for the red ball of his childhood. And when none of these things were attainable he caught himself sinking into a sadness without terror, but with reproach and with regret.

'If only it had been different,' he thought.

DAY'S END

He closed his eyes. And suddenly the young fir-tree, most graceful and lovely, stood up in the darkness before him. And whether because of this or not he knew that his life could not have been different. He saw this sadly, but clearly. And he saw suddenly the face of the man who had come and given him details of the burial of his pigs, the depth of the pit, the amount of lime, when swine-fever had come. And this to him was horrible and he shrieked: 'Leave me alone! For God's sake go away!' Then he was quiet and lay still, listening. In the stillness it seemed to him that he heard the sound of bells on a winter evening. They came closer, jangled in his ears, and then died in the distance. He pursued them, trying to catch them as he had tried to catch the ball and the smell of frumenty. But they escaped him. Silence and darkness came, and he lay listening, longing with all his might for sounds, for shapes and light.

And suddenly the fir-tree appeared again, dark and sad-looking. Its branches trembled, whispered and sighed. And it seemed to him that they were whispering, 'We are falling, we are falling.' And he felt he must reply to them, 'Fall on me – I shan't feel you, I shall never know.'

Somehow he expressed this thought and waited. His body felt light and frail, like a shell. Yet he longed for the tree to fall, cease its agony and cover him.

And suddenly in the branches of the tree a lovely commotion began, as of gladness and relief, all the

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leaves seemed to shake with laughter, and the tree did fall.

And in that moment his beard gave a sleepy droop, his hands fell away from his chest, and he paused to draw a long breath in which, too, was relief, thankfulness and an end.

THE BAKER'S WIFE

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Again and again, shaking with anger, his voice bel-
lowed up the stairs:

‘Janet! Janet! when are you coming down?’

But the woman in the bed only hunched her shoulders, and shrinking deeper beneath the sheets, remained silent. The flame of a candle standing on the chest of drawers at the bedside reeled and uprighted itself, burning with a proud, long sheath of light. In the shining eyes of the woman, as she watched it carelessly, its reflections were sharp and bright, giving them the same air of serene indomitable pride visible in the slow twining of a single black curl about her long right forefinger.

The voice called again, imperatively: ‘Janet, Janet!’ For a moment the motion of the finger went on, then suddenly the hair fell in a dark ringlet across her uncovered breast, and she answered slowly: ‘I’m coming now,’ and swung her feet to the floor.

She carried the candle with her to the dressing-table and set it against the clock there. The hands stood at half-past three. She shuddered and yawned, then went to the little cracked washstand in the

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corner and dipped her hands into the water. Her fingers moved like the pale feelers of some slow water creature, listless and dispirited. Her movements were apprehensive, too, as if she expected every moment another reminder from the voice below, and she brushed her hair in long, nervous sweeps that set her ears tingling, and stared at her young face in the glass from under lashes that blinked swiftly, as if repressing desperately a flood of regretful weeping.

And then again the voice from below startled her: 'When the devil do you think you're going to be ready, eh?'

Her lips moved quickly in a sharp reply and snapped together again. The other voice growled:

'Every one else is on the road. Didn't they wake you goin' past? For God's sake hurry!'

Without another word she dressed quickly, almost viciously. From the road outside the low rumble of passing vehicles reached her, with the sharp clap of horses' feet and an occasional shout. When she had finished her hasty dressing she drew up the blind in impatient jerks and looked down into the street below. Between the long gulf of dark houses was passing a ragged procession of wagonettes, carts, vans and traps, each with its pair of lamps shining over the shadowy figures of the riders, men and women and even children, huddled together in the chill summer darkness. The sight seemed to weary her afresh and suddenly she blew out the candle fiercely. In the other houses there were no lights, and except for the

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lamps passing endlessly below, and a few stars hanging over the roofs in the clear sky, the sombre darkness was unbroken.

As she was descending the stairs, the warm smell of fresh-baked bread rose and met her. In a moment her nostrils seemed to quiver with nausea and she stood still, trembling. Then her husband came running from the bake-house, loaded with a great basket of fancy rolls. She could hear his breath hissing through his teeth. He caught sight of her standing there, and shouted as he passed out: 'Don't stand there like a dummy! Do something! You see how late we are!'

When he returned his mouth was full of bread. Angry and excited, he thrust a basket into her hands and told her to work. She obeyed without a word, but he filled four baskets to her one. She shuddered when he came near her. Everything – the sight of his lank figure, its pale, thin face running with sweat, its shirt wide open at the chest, its apron flapping like a dusty flag about his knees as he scurried hither and thither, its long, lean arms, its splay feet thrust into untidy slippers – was all hateful to her in its meanness. She flung her basket of rolls and pastries carelessly into the cart outside. One or two were damaged and thick jam ran from their wounds.

In the bake-house she asked: 'About breakfast?'

He pointed to her damaged pastries which he had discovered and brought in. 'Clear your rubbish up,' he sneered. 'And be quick!'

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She snatched a roll. An oath was flung at her, but a moment later he shuffled off again, stuffing the pastries greedily into his own mouth. As she stood there eating tastelessly, a grey light began to penetrate the floury windows, and she heard some sparrows set up a confusion on the roofs outside. But the signs of dawn only seemed to increase her aversion against the day which seemed to stretch endlessly before her.

Less than an hour later they drove off through the grey light of the street. The dawn had still not come. The long, continuous procession was still phantom-like, the singing sound of its wheels mysterious, and its figures like a crowd of fleeing refugees. Only the bluff hails of the men and the shrill shouts of the women and children revealed their destination.

‘Burton Fair again! Burton Fair!’

‘By God, the years roll round!’

Often the baker would join in with hoarse, croaking greetings to his friends. At his side, however, Janet never spoke, but locked her arms across her breast and tried to keep from shivering. As they drove on the chill air began to awaken her hunger and sometimes, when the horse fell into a walk, she would catch the sweet smell of warm bread still rising from the cart beneath. But she said nothing. The sensation of hunger grew into a pain. She began to wish she had eaten greedily, like her husband, but she remembered the long hours of twisting, weighing, and twisting the dough until midnight and recalled

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her sickness at the sight and touch of the rows and rows of pale, unbaked shapes that were to be sold at the fair on the following day.

Once she fell into a doze, but her hunger woke her again. When she looked around she saw that the sun had risen. The long line of vehicles had put out its lights while she slept. And now on the grasses and wheat-ears, over the waving red oat-stalks, on the spiders' threads in the hedges, and dripping from the trees, everywhere she could see the heavy dew shimmering exquisitely. Overhead the larks were singing. Along the hedge-sides blackbirds squawked in terror, brushing off the dew with their wings. And whenever she bent her head against the breeze made by the motion of the cart, she could feel a faint mist settling in cool dampness on her face and hair.

A long hill, arched by great beeches and elms, came into sight. She watched the thin dark line of carts climbing it laboriously. On the nearer vehicles she could see the ribbons on the horses and women begin to sag listlessly, without a flutter, as the horses slowed down. Under the trees there was no wind. The thick roof of leaves rustled with the sound of wheels grinding, and of voices chattering gaily, and the sun threw stripes of gold between the trees on the glittering harness and the bright heads of the women.

She suffered the climb in silence. The hill seemed interminable. All the horses blew out great rays of cloudy breath and groaned heavily. Then, just as it seemed they would never reach the top, she was con-

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scious of something green flashing by, mounting the hill like an arrow. Like her, every one followed with astonishment the course of that bright green trap, ascending effortlessly. The ring of its horse's hoofs was like the crack of bullets in a quiet wood. The whisper travelled along the line like a spark:

'It's Sinclair. It's Sinclair!'

Janet held her breath. The spot of green rose higher, flashing in the sunshine, never slackening, until the vast cluster of trees at the summit took it into its breast. Around her the chatter of the women and children went on. Those who had come farthest began to eat bread and meat and pies. Sometimes a bottle, poised motionlessly, would catch the sunlight and glitter like a star. The baker stuffed his mouth with bread again. To his grunts of invitation she shook her head vehemently. It was as if in its breathless passage up the hill the green trap had snatched away her hunger like a thief.

For the rest of the journey she did not speak. Her eyes remained staring ahead, as if she had some grievance with the horizon already shimmering with heat.

By noon they had erected their stall in the fair-ground. The great spiral brasses of the shows glared fiercely in the sun. The sky, like a hard blue gem, immovable and dispassionate, seemed to imprison the heat beneath itself. From the earth rose a dust of cinders and fine straw, thick with the smell of paraffin oil, which began to settle on the stacks of

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bread and pastry under the awning. In the relentless blue heat of afternoon Janet and her husband worked on and on, selling desperately. The very breath of the man, hissing quickly, seemed avaricious.

'Wish we'd baked more. Wish we'd baked more,' he whispered.

She flung a handful of coins into a bowl and bit her lips in silence.

'Wish we'd baked more,' the voice hissed on, 'Wish we'd baked more.'

Sweat whisked from his forehead when he leaned forward, falling on the bread in shining golden drops, like sovereigns. The bowl grew heavy with money. The sight of its immense pool of silver and copper dazzled her. Filling up the empty spaces in the black trays she glared bitterly at the streak of sunlight just edging across them, the first timorous hint of evening. It crawled slowly as if sick of its own heat.

Then into that oppressiveness fell a vision of the green trap dashing up the long, tiring hillside. A breath of the fresh summer dawn seemed to rush under the awning, revolutionize her whole expression, and for a moment give her an air of girlish expectancy and grace. Then at her side her husband rubbed his hands noisily, winked and said:

'Ah! Ah! A-a-a-ah!'

It was his harvest. Her own visions succumbed beneath its weight without a murmur.

Evening came at last. A double paraffin lamp shot out its smoky flame over some red and white game of

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chance long before it was dark. In the still, light air it burned steadily. It was a sign of opulence. By and by others flashed out, too. Some magic flung a dazzling circlet of blue, green and red and gold about the shadowy head of a great roundabout. A siren screamed into the sky, as if proclaiming that miracle of wonder. The harsh, returning echo seemed to bring down the twilight.

The baker tried to light his own battered lamp, but a fierce blue flame darted out at him like a snake and he gave up the attempt with words:

‘See well enough, can’t we? See by the lights each side. Plenty of light.’

And when she complained that she had difficulty in seeing the change, he snarled: ‘Paraffin might drop on the bread. Might ruin us. I can see – surely you can.’

His harvest went on. In the three years of her married life with him there had been no better. He gloated over the diminishing heaps of bread, over the pool of silver and copper in the bowl, over everything that passed through his hands. His only regret was a constant hissing through his teeth: ‘Wish we’d baked more. Wish we’d baked more.’

Suddenly she missed the sound of his voice. She discovered herself alone in the stall. Lifting the flap of the awning she called ‘Jack! Jack!’ in the direction of the cart, but he did not come. She called again. Sitting down on a box she resigned herself after the bitter reflection:

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'It happened last year. Now it's the same again.'

She ate a piece of bread and took a drink of stale water from the bucket under the counter. Too tired to light the lamp, she watched the bright river of faces moving tumultuously past her. The last of the pastries vanished. The single remaining roll she tried to eat, but it fell from her hands into the bucket, floating there forlornly. She sat staring at it, astounded at her own wastefulness. Fear swept over her face, then regret, then suddenly and without warning, that same joyous grace of once earlier in the day, transforming her as the dew had transformed the oat-stalks, the grasses, the leaves and even the stones in the sunny dawn. Strange bluish lights seemed to laugh among her hair. Her hands played restlessly across her breast, as if solacing some painful ecstasy there. Her head dropped to her hands and both became still, as if she were lost in the remembrance of an immense wonder.

Aroused at last by the sound of a voice, she could not immediately banish this frame of mind. The brassy jangle of the organs reasserted itself like a pain. There seemed to her no reason why she should suffer its infliction, why she should relinquish her moments of poignant reflection, even why she should answer the voice asking questions above her head.

Nevertheless she raised her head at last. For a moment she did not move again. Then she stumbled against the bowl of money as she got up hastily and

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gestured pitifully to the figure of Sinclair asking for bread.

Her voice was a whisper: 'We've sold it all.'

'All? But you can find me something?'

She shook her head with a wan smile. They stood looking at each other, Janet's eyes uneasy, the man's in a profound stare fixed on her face. Then a whisper passed between them:

'Where is your husband?'

Her hands sprang to her mouth, as if to suppress a cry.

'He's gone – he's gone somewhere. Do you want him? Why do you ask like that? Why do you ask?'

In answer he beat a perplexed tattoo on one of the trays with his swagger-cane. His eyes lowered. At once her own swept up and fed on the changing expressions of his face, on his piercing eyes. Next moment he glanced up and caught her fully in this excited act. Her glance fell at once to his breast, to the smart check of the coat, the tip of the yellow bandana peeping from the pocket, the gold scarf-pin, to a medal for shooting on his watch-chain, and to his brown muscular fingers.

'You say you've no bread?'

'It's all gone.'

'And your husband – he's gone too?'

'Yes.'

His glance swept in a half circle towards the lights. She saw their reflections run in a coloured panorama across his black eyes. Suddenly they swung back and

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stopped, utterly motionless, transfixed, as if fascinated by some magical thread in the coarse grey awning hung just behind her head. He bombarded her with a fusillade of whispers, of which the last seemed to strike her with deadly effect:

‘You have not forgotten?’

Her lips hung a little apart, poignant, perplexed. The word ‘forgotten’ burned in her head, actually as she imagined a bullet would have done. Its painfulness, sometimes usually warm, at others stabbing violently, left her utterly still. The jingle of mechanical music reached her as the sound of a hymn might reach a dying man – the faint remembrance of a detached existence, irritable, pointless, remote.

She snatched up a roll of striped awning suddenly, holding it across her breast, as if for a protection.

He caught the words ‘Impossible – going to shut up – a long journey.’

She vanished. Reappearing, she stretched out the canvas and hung it across the front of the stall. Her actions, quick, unpremeditated, flabbergasted him. His hands hung motionlessly at his side. She muttered disjointed things: ‘Close – be here half the night – darkness.’

And within the stall, where he found himself following her irresistibly, there was literally darkness like the strange dense air of just before dawn, still, expectant, inscrutable.

And there was a smell of paraffin which he forgot abruptly in locating her figure. A heavy jingle of

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money reached him. With outstretched fingers he groped towards it. 'Janet! Janet!'

She sat on the box at his feet and buried her face in her hands. 'Oh, if you knew what it was like! I'm tired. Last night I didn't go to bed until twelve, and this morning I got up in darkness. And the heat this afternoon! Then he grows meaner every day and expects me to be mean, too.'

She poured out her grief, quietly, regretfully, into his breast, talking about the dreariness, the drudgery, the mournfulness of her life in that oppressive bakehouse, the avariciousness of her husband, overwhelming him with secret confidences, the full, unrestrained speech of a woman suddenly aroused to the magnanimity and wonder of a past lover. And gradually her head sank to his breast. There she could smell the fine freshness of his clothes, feel the coolness of the watch-chain against her neck, and hear even the thump of his heart and the tick of the minutes. And it seemed to her, as he caressed her listless head, that their love-affair of three or four years before was the only worthy, beautiful thing in her life, and her quarrel with him and her marriage, in a fit of desperation and spite to the baker, the most foolish and deadly. She remembered how he had lavished gifts upon her, given her books to read, made her sing, until it seemed that she would become a cultured, refined and beautiful woman. But now she had forgotten the songs, had no time to read anything, and never went anywhere. She remembered, too, and

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with silent bursts of ecstasy like those of the earlier day, evenings on his farm, afternoons in the wood, by the river, and a single Easter Sunday when they had lolled all day under the damson-trees, just coming out in blossom, in his long orchard sloping towards the sun, listening to each other's voices, with the larks keeping up a perpetual anthem far up in the serene sky; and Amos, the old servant, had brought food to her very lap, and talked to her about her mother.

Now in the gloominess of the shut-in stall, she let him embrace and kiss her. She could not remember when she had been kissed last, and she held his head against hers for a long time.

'How old are you?' he whispered.

'Twenty-seven. In a year or two I shall be thirty. Sometimes I cry up in the hay-loft, then come down and talk with the horse, because I think he's tired, too.'

Her voice trailed off. It seemed to both that the only fortification against her existence was silence; and at last they let their fingers fall from each other's shoulders. Suddenly the thought of the baker brought them both to their feet.

'He'll have to be found,' she said. 'I'll get the money together. Go and harness the horse.'

They rode out of the fair-ground in silence, Sinclair driving. Up the wide streets of the town swam dark streams of people. In the market square a torch-light procession was forming up, throwing a smoky

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light into the windows and on the bright faces of the girls and their men. Above them gaudy strings of triangular flags dipped from tree to tree. Noisy crowds of men and women sat drinking beer in the sultry air outside the inns. Now and then a rocket would scratch the black summer sky with its swift white point before bursting into green and vermilion stars.

The baker was sprawled across a table under an inn archway when they found him. His head rested calmly in a pool of beer. Some one had crowned him with a straw-hat no bigger than a saucer, and an arrogant blue feather was stuck in his button-hole. As Janet approached, a white-faced barmaid lifted up his head, wiped away the beer with a towel, then let it fall again and vanished with the air of one having performed the last rites.

'Who's that?' mumbled the baker. 'Eh?'

'It's Janet.'

'Come take me home?' he muttered.

'Yes.'

'You're a good gal. You're a good gal. You are.' He groped unsuccessfully for her arm. 'You catch hold of me arm, catch hold, good gal; can't manage without - catch hold! Got th' money? That's all right. Bit dark now, now ain't it? Catch hold. Good gal.'

'It's a long journey. Mind the step.'

They pushed him up into the trap. He sank down without grace or spirit, silent except for a groan or two.

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She whispered into the face of the farmer when he began to condole with her. 'It happened last year, and the year before. He doesn't often get drunk, only now and again. That's all.'

The sorrowfulness of the words seemed to pass into her eyes and reflect itself in his face.

'You can't do anything.' Suddenly she caught his sleeve and poured out a torrent of beseeching whispers: 'Now go away. Go away. I can't bear to see you stand there looking as if you'd lost something. Go away. It's a long journey, and we must go. He'll sleep all the way home, and I shall think of nothing but you.'

'Every day I walk in the woods —'

She muttered as when they had first met: 'Impossible — work, work — I could never come. It's all over.'

'Forgive me.'

Her lips parted. Astonishment made her eyes larger and more beautiful. 'Don't speak like that.' Her words became disjointed again. 'It's too late, it's awful, everything's gone, it's lost, there's nothing.'

'I could give you anything, I'll send you things —'

She sprang up into the cart and drove away with feverish haste among the crowd, past the torch-light procession, and clear of the town. In the cool night air her husband fell into a doze. The image of Sinclair, as she had last seen him, troubled and pained in the glow of the inn lights, travelled with her like the sound of the horse's feet. Glancing back at the

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great circle of light lying in a soft arch over the town, she remembered the clean smell of his clothes, the tick of his watch, the panorama of lights in his eyes and his attentive silence to all the outpouring of her grief. She recalled, too, their quarrel, its tragically insignificant cause – a swift word or two, the Easter day beneath the damson-trees, and all her life of three, four and five years past.

The click-click of one of her husband's feet against an iron fitting woke her from her remembrances. At the sound her anger woke too: anger against the meanness and pettiness of her existence, against the baker, the low, oppressive bake-house, against the long road ahead and against herself for having married him. She lashed the horse in her rage. It sprang forward as if shot. Her husband's head sank lower on his breast with a groan. At the head of the hill a great mass of trees took them swiftly into its bosom. The ping of the lash on the horse's flank gave her a sort of fierce joy, and they flew down the hill as Sinclair had flown up it in the morning. Her hair unloosed itself and blew across her eyes. She drove half-blindly. Stones lying in the road shot away as if terrified; and terror began to shine in her own eyes, too, and it seemed that nothing mattered except her anger and remorse.

Then, as they dashed and lurched across a great curve over the brook at the bottom, her husband moved his head and muttered:

'What's matter? What's the matter? Careful! –

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upset the blasted lot, upset the blasted lot!' He shrieked awfully, 'Janet!'

She tried to steady the horse. What had he said? Upset them? The reins tightened in her hands. Upset them? Her anger, abating suddenly, left her with a clear, dispassionate view of what might have happened, a vision of his young, dead face, reproachful, pitiful even in its avariciousness, the blood pouring from his temples into his eyes which she had once imagined kind, drowning their light; and then she saw by contrast, steadily and without emotion, what must go on – that for perhaps another thirty, forty, or even fifty years she must live and work and care for the thing lying at her side.

And suddenly she wept, tears streamed down her face, and bending her head under the weight of her grief she began to drive slowly, the reins tight in her hands.

THE BIRTHDAY

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For three years Nicoll had been at the university. On coming home in the autumn of his last year he was invited and went to a birthday-party of his sister's friend, where he found himself not only at a loss to explain why he had been invited but why the birthday should be kept at all. And as he looked down the table, which had been crowned by a cake bearing sixteen candles, he felt suddenly a faint, superior disgust for all creatures who kept birthdays, for the twenty people assembled there and for the oblong sea of sickly coloured food stretching before him. And he thought only of how soon it would be possible to get away.

To make it worse, before the eating began there arose some difficulty about lighting the candles, there was a hubbub, and an unknown girl in a red dress got up and, after shouting his name, tossed back her jet hair and smiled at him. A little girl began to cry, an old man narrowly escaped burning his beard in the broken ring of flames and kept saying:

'Irene, my dear, this is nothing to what it will be when you're twenty-one!'

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But Irene was not in the room and this saying became a joke to all but the man himself. A little old woman at Nicoll's side, nearly submerged in shadows, kept chuckling to herself and declaring: 'She's like her mother,' and not caring that no one agreed with her. Every one laughed and talked together. A little round-faced boy, with wonder-stricken eyes, blew out the matches when the candles had been lit, and then when the meal began, cried out, injured: 'I can't see to eat my jelly, I can't see to eat anything!'

But no one heeded him, the noise increased and some one cried in astonishment:

'She's really sixteen!'

And another: 'It doesn't seem long since she was born! Sixteen!'

'I can't see to eat anything!' complained the little boy.

'My dear,' said the old man, 'this is nothing to what it will be when you're twenty-one!'

And because Irene was still not in the room, every one laughed again. The table shook, the little boy banged his fists on his knees. Then suddenly, without warning, a candle fell from the cake, burnt a hole in the white cloth, and spluttered out.

A silence followed. Nicoll heard the old woman breathing as if her throat needed oiling and wondered why the quietness was so sombre and significant. And then, at that moment, the red-frocked girl cried

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out in dismay: 'Oh, I say! That's bad luck! That's bad luck!'

The commotion, as if under the urge of this omen, became terrific and to Nicoll the room seemed hot, his head stifled and the spoon in his hand like a burning wire. Every one talked of the fallen candle, of Irene and what she would think. Some one shouted her name, but she did not come and the old woman in shadows muttered some excuse for her. Nicoll stared at a red pool of fruit on his plate, sick and depressed by the idea of night going on indefinitely. Again and again he wished it were all over, all the superstitious talk, the hot room and the candle-light which made the heads of the old men look like yellow cheeses. And at last it seemed he could bear it no longer.

Then Irene came in and, only half-noticed, lit two lamps at the other end of the room.

Nicoll sat watching her. As she blew out the taper and stood regarding her guests, the smoke swam up leisurely before her face and was reflected in her eyes. At that moment he could only think:

'How tall she is!'

Then, as if step by step, he began ascending to other thoughts and impressions about her, and though not thinking consciously of her beauty, it seemed to him that in the hot noisy room her throat and arms gave out a coolness that transformed her into something singular and lovely. Under the lamp-glow her skin shone deep cream in colour. In her

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stillness she looked not only impressive but transient, too. And because of this Nicoll found that his boredom and the insufferable shallow chatter on all sides seemed to pass into forgetfulness. The unbearable atmosphere cast by the candles and the stagnant air of the room vanished as if blown away by a fresh wind and he was filled with a desire to whisper to her and ask her to answer him.

He fell into a long, dreamy contemplation about her, ate nothing, watched with joy every flicker that went across her face and was annoyed only when he heard the girl in red mouth in her ear: 'A candle fell off the cake, Irene. It's bad luck.'

He noticed she said nothing in return but began carrying away the empty fruit bowls with a serious, preoccupied air. She passed near him but did not smile and with every movement seemed to grow sadder and graver, as if in mourning for the irrecoverable year which the party celebrated.

Soon she vanished, the candles were one by one blown out by the ecstatic breath of the little boy. Pipes were lit, the old man coughed and hummed tunes, every one sighed. But Nicoll was conscious of nothing except that every few moments something beautiful passed and repassed him, making him glowing and sensitive.

'You'd never dream she was sixteen,' whispered the old woman. 'She's like her mother, too.'

'Yes. And how tall she is,' was all he answered.

But the old woman said nothing in return, and he

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sat in silence, watching the door where he expected Irene to come in.

He was invited to join some sort of game but refused, folded his hands over his knees and sat with an air of resignation. Then the door opened and a draught blew in various sounds. Among them he heard a voice calling 'Irene, Irene!' a sound of pattering feet, and some crockery set down.

The door was shut and for a long time never opened again. At his side the old woman grumbled in whispers about the chilly nights, the little boy talked to himself, and at Nicoll the girl in red would now and then smile. There was a song, he applauded unconsciously and noticed the men were playing whist in one corner. The door was opened. Irene's mother came in. He was disappointed.

He began to wonder where the secret of her beauty lay. Then some one came in and said it was raining, and immediately he thought of the September dusk, the trees moving gently as if shrugging their dark shoulders against the falling dampness, and the ground drenched and hidden by leaves giving out fragrance. And just as it was impossible to say where the secret of that beauty lay he once more sat in contemplation about her.

Soon afterwards he suddenly went out. In the dark passage he heard her voice and, seeing light coming from under a door in a sharp streak, went in without waiting to discover who was there. He asked:

'Will you give me a drink of water?'

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Irene smiled and disappeared. As if in a dream he heard the glass filling fiercely and in the room behind voices mixed with the moan of a violin some one had just struck up. Irene seemed gone for a long time. When he saw her return it was with a sensation of fear, as if he expected her to dash the water into his face and wake him. Sagging drops still hung on the lip of the glass as she held it just under his face.

For a minute nothing happened and, as though listening to the violin, they each stood there with an air of anticipation. Then Nicoll took the glass and without drinking said to her:

‘It’s been very long since I saw you.’

Because his remark seemed foolish and mundane he gulped some of the water quickly, then stared at her, saw her murmur ‘Yes,’ and return his stare. He could say nothing.

‘It’s been five years,’ she said at last.

He found her voice quiet and that it went with the rest of her being as harmoniously as the colour of a flower with its plant and made her beauty singular and touching.

‘And you’re sixteen, to-day!’ he exclaimed. ‘I can’t imagine it. It’s not possible.’

‘That’s grandfather playing the violin,’ she said. ‘When you think of it, that seems just as silly, but it’s true.’

He laughed, held up the glass, saw pinkish, shadowy shapes swimming behind and in it and drank.

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'I ought to have wished you many happy returns long ago,' he said.

She smiled as if in a flood of bewilderment, which he could not understand, and suddenly asked:

'Is it true a candle fell off the cake? Is it? I wasn't there. Is it true?'

'Yes. It's quite right,' he replied. 'It burnt a hole in the table-cloth, that's all.'

'It's bad luck!'

'Oh! that's so silly. It doesn't mean anything. You mustn't take notice.'

'No, no,' she persisted. 'It means something is going to happen to me. Perhaps I'm going —'

'Oh! it's all nonsense,' he said. 'It means nothing. It's all nonsense, really.'

'No. It means something,' she repeated. 'Why should it fall off, unless?'

He made no answer and all the time he was silent imagined she looked on him as a boy. He wanted to tell her this but dare not. In the room behind the violin ceased, a dreary silence fell, and in the silence a moth brushed noisily against the lamp. Another lay with wings pressed like death on the window. Nicoll heard it raining outside, the leaves whispering and somewhere a tap dripping.

'I ought to go back,' she said.

'Not yet!'

She went to the lamp. By its light he saw her fingers tremble and asked:

'What's the matter, Irene?'

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‘Nothing!’ she said; and then, ‘You’ve forgotten a candle fell off the cake. That means something.’

With three angry puffs she put the room in darkness. He groped about saying, ‘Where are you? Irene! Where are you?’ Then he heard the swish of her dress and a laugh. The next moment he ran his hands against the wall and then on to her breast. It so happened she was pinioned by his arms and looked up at him reproachfully. In contrast with the hardness of the wall behind, her neck seemed unearthly and soft. And without a word of warning he kissed her twice.

Nothing was said. The birthday party went on noisily behind them, Nicoll heard the rain, the tap dripping and a moth booming somewhere fiercely. He thought of the candle which had fallen from the cake, wondered if it betokened anything, and then felt her suddenly squeeze his hand, saw her run away and disappear through a flash of light at the other door.

Soon afterwards he followed her, the violin began again, whist by the men went on in the corner, he was ogled by the girl in red and saw that nothing in the room had changed.

He sought out Irene and watched her. But little by little her spiritual and fresh beauty seemed to undergo a change and no longer impress him. Suddenly, the talk, the laughter, the rain, the violin and the lights were changed too. The idea of beauty was itself transient. The thought of this and that Irene

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would never be sixteen again and appear to him as she had appeared in the dark kitchen, made him tired and sad, too.

And whether because of this or not, he had a desire not to look at her again, but to go home, not speak and only by silence impress everything upon himself.

He did so, and after thinking of her for two hours fell asleep and dreamed of moths, an old woman, running water and a violin.

But for Irene it was different. She slept little, and when not sleeping thought as to why he had gone without a word, of the future, his looks, the dark kitchen, his two kisses, and the candle which had fallen off the cake.

THE SHEPHERD

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All day the February earth had lain under an immense lid of cloud. The woods, full of green saplings and shaggy older trees, laboured futilely against a fast-driven rain which soaked them steadily. Down the trunks rivulets of water rushed continuously, ending in dark pools at the feet of the trees. From the summit of the hill where the cottage stood, sodden and dark but for a square of light under its north eave, the road wound like a shallow yellow stream.

Night, which had come early, brought a dash of snow with the rain. In the hollows the woods tossed and moaned like a pile of wounded bodies thrown in a pit to die. The light in the cottage seemed the only thing unmoved. Over all stretched a bitter coldness, like a blanket of steel.

In the kitchen of the cottage a young shepherd now and then disturbed the red-hot mass of the fire and threw in a handful of wood. As the greenish smoke curled upward he would blow fiercely on the lower embers until flames broke out, bursting up in a light that deepened the shadows of his narrow-bitten

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cheeks. Then he would walk about in the half-darkness, anxiously listening to the storm before returning to the fire, where for more than an hour a kettle had purred at the boil.

When he could curb his restlessness no longer he would ascend to the room where the light was. There he remained for long periods talking in low whispers to the straight, pallid figure, barely in womanhood, but on the verge of motherhood, who lay and looked at him in the candle-glare.

That figure would continually question him in whispers:

‘Has he come yet?’

‘No.’

‘You think young Jabez told him?’

‘I writ a note,’ he would say.

At that perhaps she would sigh in the stillness and then ask: ‘Look an’ see.’

He generally obeyed her with something like fierceness, as if remembering what existed beyond the window-glass.

‘You can’t see. It’s snowing – little bits.’

‘Snowing?’ she echoed.

If ever he approached her the whole bed and its occupant came under a great shadow. The face into which he poured the whole content of his fear was scarcely visible to him.

‘Are you cold? You don’t want nothing? It ain’t too bad? Sure?’

She smiled, and observing his persistent attitude on

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the edge of the bed, told him: 'Go and get your supper now.'

But he lingered near her, eyeing acutely her dried-up face, half-ghastly in the yellow light, in which the eyes, full of a sort of deep, savage patience, seemed the only things alive.

'I ain't hungry,' he growled without malice.

'Hadn't you better get summet anyway?' she quietly suggested.

'I'll see.'

'I don't mind being by myself.' Her eyes darted fearless glances through the room. Observing, however, he made no move for the door, they alighted on his figure in a pitying stare as if he had been the child for which she was lying prostrate.

'Go and get something,' she begged him.

He went suddenly, as if having caught some unexpected gleam in the glance she gave him. Downstairs he threw more wood on the fire, and bending nearly low enough to have his face licked by the flames, ate silently. The food vanished methodically, producing no more expression in him than words on a deaf man. Occasionally, when a stillness fell on the room he heard the noises of the storm exploring the woods and hollows in low growls like those of dissatisfied dogs.

Having eaten the shepherd pushed open the door an inch or two: beyond the patch of earth sheltered by the house he could see the grass, already bitten grey by the wind, getting whiter and whiter. Out

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there transient, dark shapes seemed to spring from the pale breast of earth and twine about each other with moans. Above the snow lay a heavy darkness, under the oppression of which the light from the upper window was suffocated, its chance of existence swamped almost as completely as the cries of the sheep and lambs in the hovels behind.

The man retreated quickly against the blast, cold enough to have turned his face to a lump of ice.

He ascended again. 'He ain't coming,' he said. His eyes shone icily as he bent over her face, which he thought whiter than the snow that had mercilessly battered his own.

'All right?' he whispered.

In reply, she smiled as if to convey: 'It's no worse, it's no worse.' Something, however, warned him of the imaginative nature of the smile, which was painful, too. He became alarmed, and went suddenly to the window, where he burst out:

'I'm going.'

Beyond a short murmur, which might have been a sound of protest suppressed by some unconscious force, she made no sound, but watched him viciously rub his hand across the window before repeating his intention.

'I'm going.'

This time she nodded. There was a silence.

'Will it be all right?' he whispered into her face.

'I don't know,' she faltered.

'You?'

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'I think so.' She began to rub playful fingers across her breast as if to dispel her fear.

'I'm going then.' He lumbered out.

Alone, she listened to the sound of his retreating footsteps with a growing hope that he might meet the doctor on the doorstep. For a long time she remained thus, attentively silent, making only one movement, a restless play of her fingers over her breast, which seemed to have progressed mechanically ever since his decision to leave her.

Outside the wind had leapt from moanings to terrific shrieks. Borne down on swift gusts of frozen air the noises assailed the shepherd as loudly as if a hundred yelling mouths had been thrust into his face. Stepping from the murky-warm atmosphere of the kitchen he met the furious inrush of air with something like a shout of panic, which, however, the wind swept away before it became audible to ears other than his own. With a hand at his throat he stood for a moment cringing and squinting. Even so it was impossible to see beyond the yellow square in the snow. He pushed blindly into open space, his feet swishing heavily in the snow-laden grass.

Clear of the shelter of the walls the wind beset him at every point. Once again he was forced to a standstill. About his head he wrapped a pair of frantic arms in order to shield his eyes. But the snow forced itself through the crevices of his cramped hands until he despaired and bent down, finally crouching on the ground to feel for the road. He discovered every-

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where choked with snow. Suddenly enraged he began to kick desperately at the dead earth, but beneath the snow found it grassy and water-logged.

Then he found his vision strengthening. To his right lay the hollow of trees, black as a cavern, to his left more trees, clinging to the side of the hill, and before him the only unbroken space, across which the wind tore as if driven to that frenzy by a greater, invisible force behind.

A sort of sombre anger, deepening with every blast of wind, possessed him as he stumbled stiffly downhill. He discovered he needed every breath in his body. In consequence he drew his mouth into a thin line that had all the appearance of both attack and defence against the storm. Now and then, as brutally as if it had been the face of an enemy, he wiped his face with a drenched sleeve. That swift movement seemed to have purpose enough to crush every feature he possessed, though after it the eyes only held their resentment and the lips their impenetrability more tenaciously. In that way he pushed himself against the body of the storm. Already he seemed to have spent hours in doing nothing else. Sometimes, however, he found time to shoot a rapid glance or two in the direction of the great masses of trees below, searching for any glimmer of light the storm had not annihilated. But every rush of the wind seemed to render his chance of success more remote. He was forced again into that position with hands across his chest and face bent to earth. He saw nothing but the

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slightly luminous snow, into which his feet dropped with a great slip-slopping sound. A sense of futility seized him: the road seemed endless. His body felt like an empty sack hung out for the wind to blow through. He tried to hurry, but already the limbs seemed to have come under the spell of a mechanism not only powerful but irresistible.

With a 'God damn it,' he threw himself savagely forward. The ground appeared to rise and touch his face. He actually felt the dead-cold contact of it against one cheek. For a second or two he lay still – flat-stomached against the snow, wondering. For the first time there was an utter calm. His fall seemed to have clapped greater mufflers both over his ears and the voice of the storm. He could just detect a far-away moan, that was all.

He leapt up. The thought of his wife negatived completely any idea of bodily hurt in himself. After removing the snow from his head by a number of dog-like shakes he bent his face to the ground and started off at a half-run. A vision of the room in which the steadiness of the spiky candle-flame was matched only by the immobility of the woman on the bed was enough to carry him some distance without a stop.

The ground now began to slant steeply under his feet. He was placed in the predicament of forging against the storm on the one hand and holding himself in check on the other. He had no desire to repeat his sprawl in the snow. The attitude he took up,

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therefore, was one of extreme awkwardness, in which the body was held rigidly backward instead of at a low forward hunch. Thus he continued to descend warily until the lowest point of the road was reached. There he commenced to run. Above his head the branches swayed and shrieked as if they had been spectators to some fantastic comedy of which his progress was part. But he ran on.

He discovered himself to be shortly knee-deep in the overflow of a stream he had forgotten in his haste. The water was intensely cold and thick with snow, of which great lumps would constantly float past, grazing his trembling shins. At the first shock of being half-submerged he stood utterly still. He had no idea as to what lay ahead. The flood might extend or deepen beyond his experience – he did not know. It had once covered the hedge-tops.

Shuddering in great gasps he waded steadily across. On the other side, soaked to his buttocks, he shook himself like a half-drowned dog. Beginning miserably to walk the short distance between himself and the village he once or twice paused and turned round. There, as if wedged permanently in the hillside, the light in his cottage remained steadily visible. Reassured, he went on, and then slowly, almost shyly, out of the blackness ahead, other lights came and met him.

‘The doctor has this minute gone,’ a voice informed him.

‘Gone?’

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'This minute.'

'You couldn't say where?'

The maid pondered, retreated, and could be heard distantly questioning. The shepherd stood and shivered. It seemed years before the return of the voice.

'He has gone to the shepherd's,' he heard.

'Ah!'

'And he went the long way round. They do say the other is flooded.'

He uttered a half-laugh and went.

A second time he waded a passage through the flood which had diverted the course of the doctor's trap. All those former sensations – the grating of the lumps of snow, the mighty gasping, the dragging out of his miserable body, the shaking and uncontrollable limbs – all came again. It was like the return of an old dream.

Behind him the lights retreated into blackness. Snow continued to fall, still in a perverse wind that hit him at every step up the hill, at the top of which his own light still shone, uncrossed by shadow. In that return journey he neither encountered nor heard a living thing. The light ahead alone prevented a belief that the only existing creature on the face of the earth was himself. A sense of miserable desolation replaced all others, and he came to think of the wind and snow as mere monotonies where they had once been afflictions. Thus, in a mood of what, in other circumstances and men, might have been

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one of proud indifference, he drew gradually nearer the light.

The neighing of a horse reached him. Pushing open the door he sensed another presence; something foreign lay in a chair near the dying fire. It was a man's cap.

With relief he sat opposite it, occupying himself for what seemed an age by throwing handfuls of wood into the fire and watching it smoke damply. Intermittently the sound of muffled steps reached him from overhead: an ominous sound. Time passed, and the red heart of the fire shrank.

It needed another hour for morning when a voice from the cavernous stairs assailed him.

'That you, Shepherd?'

'Yessir.' His emotions were many.

'Shepherd?'

'Yessir. All right?'

A long pause, full of fear it seemed to him.

'I'm afraid the little one - Shepherd; I'm afraid so.'

He began his sympathies. The wife would be all right. The Shepherd watched him dully as he caved his hands over the red bottom of the fire. His dark form stood up like a beam, barring every inch of glow. Minutes went silently through the dark room.

Two 'Good-nights' made a little gap in the stillness. The distant moan and the near patter on the window-panes went on. There was a sound of wheels,

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growing fainter. Mechanically the Shepherd ascended the stairs and sat down softly by the bed. Something in a little white bundle at his side made him afraid of setting up a sound, and in silence he watched absorbedly that other face not yet conscious of his presence, until long after a sound awoke in the snow outside, then another and another, rising and calling him with all the insistency of a new life.

Then he rose and walked stiffly to the window. The lambs cried afresh from the whitened hovels, and as he stood there dawn came greyly over the snow, like a thing stirring from sleep.

And turning suddenly he saw that that other figure had awoken to its light.

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Suddenly, across the empty seats of the church, the two women caught sight of each other. One of them, Helena, the young doctor's wife, crouched on the altar steps in the middle of a little sea of wood-anemones and daffodils, for it was Easter Sunday, and in an hour the service would begin. The other, an older woman with a gray scarf tied over her head, sat far back in great shadows which made her features indistinguishable. It was just possible to tell she was staring at Helena, nothing more.

Having allowed herself what seemed a hasty glimpse, Helena bent her head away again and began putting anemones with daffodils in artistic bunches. On her moving the flowers the altar became full of spring scents; sunlight fell in a great beam across the floor, and from the stones a sweet coolness rose up through her limbs.

All at once she shivered. Why was it the woman was so early for the service, which did not begin for an hour? She shifted her position a little and was able to take other looks at the dark figure, which sat with a sort of desperation about the hang of the head,

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as if trying not to faint or fall asleep. She was quite motionless. Soon afterwards a pinkish glow from one of the windows fell on her, and lighting up her face, made her look like a picture of one of the saints.

Under some unconquerable impulse Helena went down and along the nave to where the woman sat sunk in thought. In silence the two faced each other, until, half-ashamed of her erectness, Helena sat suddenly on the seat in front and blinked in an ashamed way.

‘Is it the service you’ve come for?’ she asked.

‘They don’t have services in the morning, do they?’
The voice had no spirit.

‘Yes, that is, to-day,’ she quietly replied. ‘It’s Easter.’

‘Is it?’ came in faint tones. ‘Well –’

They sat in silence until Helena said:

‘There’s a service in an hour.’

Then in a whispering voice that seemed to run in among the stone pillars as if afraid, she was asked in return:

‘Have you got anything to eat?’

She had the foolishness to ask in reply:

‘Are you hungry, then?’

As the woman stared a pair of white slits in her sombre eyes seemed to imply, ‘Has it been so long since you saw anyone hungry that you’ve forgotten what it looks like?’

And with a pale forefinger and thumb she began picking at the dark material of her dress above the

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wrist; the joints stood out like very thin flints and the wrist-bone like a stone knob.

'Who are you?' asked Helena.

In reply she received a look which suggested: 'I expect you've forgotten that words don't feed folk,' but otherwise the question went unanswered.

Under the tyrannical looks which the woman sent out, Helena began a stream of questionings.

'Who are you? What have you come into the church for?' – these were uppermost.

To all of them she received one answer.

'I'm hungry and beat.'

She had an idea that at that point it was dutiful to do something kind and illuminating, and not ask other questions or sit drumming her fingers on the head of the seat. She had even an inclination to prayer, which was strange enough, such as, 'Lord God, open Thy heart to Thy servant . . . have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us. Let the words of my mouth . . . glory everlasting . . . Jesus Christ . . .' She felt herself babble after the manner of the priests. But it wouldn't do. Something of a simple, earnest nature was necessary: 'Thou who art God of all flesh, let not Thy children suffer . . . suffer iniquities and hardship,' she tried again in desperation, 'Christ our –'

But 'Christ our Lord' went unfinished as if she had been caught in an immoral act.

'Haven't you got anything?'

'I'll get something – Yes –' The words flowed

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torrentially. 'In a minute – tell me who you are? Promise you won't move till I come back? Who are you?'

The woman looked up. A shaft of cordial yellow light fell on her hands, and her lips moved once or twice: 'I'll tell you when you come back.'

As she moved away Helena saw scraps of straw on the woman's back, and thinking instinctively of barns and ditches and that there was some coincidence in the woman coming into the church on Easter Sunday, opened the door and began to run.

Her husband, meeting her on the steps of the house, tried to prevent her brushing past him, and even attempted to kiss her, but she cried out: 'Let me go! You don't understand what a hurry I'm in!'

'The service isn't due to begin yet,' he whispered as a reminder. 'Have you decorated the church? You smell of daffodils.'

She looked at him sharply and because she felt unclean would have been less surprised had he said: 'You smell of dirt and straw.'

'The spring's in your head,' she suggested and tried to run. 'You must let me go. You don't understand. Don't keep me! There's a heap of flowers still lying on the altar; the service will begin and I'm late!'

'I'll help you bunch them!'

'No, no!'

'What's the matter?'

She replied 'nothing' and began wondering first if

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the woman would stay in the church, then if the strips of straw would drop from her back when she got up, and lastly what made her look so adamant and chastising. With fresh shades of meaning the words 'I'm hungry and beat' kept rising up, then the moments when the women had first become aware of each other, when the other had looked like a picture of one of the saints, when the sun had fallen on her wrists and she had looked reproachfully up and said: 'Haven't you got anything?'

'Let me go in! Let me go in!'

'Not so much hurry! Not so much -'

'But you don't understand what a state I've left it all in,' she half-yelled at him. Fiercely struggling she ran into the house at last.

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But it was already late, and in the foremost seats of the church one or two children and an old woman had gathered, whispering in low tones, when she returned. Beams of sunlight lay on the altar-brasses and seats of the south side. Up and down the altar-steps the figure of the vergier, already cassocked, moved busily and noiselessly, clearing away wood-anemones and daffodils.

All this she saw as she crossed the threshold and went quickly to the seat where she had left the woman. But there, except for sunlight and strips of straw, the seat was dark and empty.

She sat down, hid the basket with her dress and feet, and while watching the first stragglers come in

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for the service thought of the woman and of where she might be. But no conjecture seemed strong enough, and little by little she gave herself up to the contemplation of the woman's face as she had first seen it. As she did so the church half-filled and the bell began to ring harshly. Those who came in sat looking stupidly at the flowers, and fidgeting impatiently seemed glad when the bell ceased and chants upset the stillness.

She babbled with the rest: 'Therefore let us keep the feast; not with the old leaven . . . but with the unleavened bread of sincerity. . . .'

And she sat still and was silent as if stupefied in the prayers. On occasions she could not bear the darkness, but opened her eyes and stared at the scraps of straw visible as dull-yellow dashes in the shadows. Gloom hung through the church and reminded her of the gloom of the woman's face under the grey scarf. She fancied she heard a sound close to her face and started violently, then saw the offertory box beneath her nose. It passed on. To-day the offerings were for the priests, she remembered. The service seemed interminable and dull. The hymns were many and tedious, the wood-anemones drooped and the sun did not come out again.

'And the Holy Ghost, Amen!'

Clouds piled on top of each other and patients kept her husband away all the afternoon. Of the woman she saw nothing and in the solitude thought of her face, then of her wrist-bones and hands and

THE EASTER BLESSING

dirty back, and was revolted. In a mood of self-reproach she vexatiously tapped her hands together and fancied she heard some one demanding things to eat. Although it was strange and even ironical that she should shed tears for a woman whose eyes had never for one moment been anything but dry, she felt she must weep. And she did so, and Easter Sunday wore on. At evening, in the church, candles were lit. She saw them and a monotone of voices at prayer seemed to fall oppressively on her head from the bluish sky.

When she was seated at the supper-table, eating nothing, the gardener came in and said it was hailing, and listening she heard the stones on the window. Then foolishly she tried to pray, but the hail fell sharply, drowning the sound of the prayer in the beginning.

Her husband came home at last, looking tired, and she noticed traces of the storm in the shape of hail-stones lying in the brim of his hat. While he sat at the table, grunting and eating, she stirred the fire and sat looking into its heart.

‘A most unfortunate thing,’ her husband soon afterwards began. ‘A suicide in Low Pond. Imagine how I was annoyed to be dragged from one end of the town to the other and then be quite useless.’

‘Yes.’ The voice had no spirit.

‘Yes, it was really not only annoying, but quite nauseating. A woman – starved. Nothing on under her dress and only a bit of a scarf over her head.’

THE EASTER BLESSING

She listened hardest, it seemed, when he paused.

‘We brought her home in the hail. The hail bounced on her face.

He continued to eat. Helena rose and going to the window gazed out at the hail reposing in uneven lines of white on the dark paths and lawn. Now, however, no more was falling and through the clear air were plainly visible the lighted church-windows, the casts of light on the ground, and the coloured figures of the saints on the glass. She remembered the moment when she had seen the woman in a pinkish glow, and with a sudden flash of horror recollected that while looking like one of the saints she must have been hungry too.

Her husband ate stolidly and for a long time. ‘A nice thing,’ he would declare. ‘A suicide and a hail-storm on Easter Sunday.’

When Helena looked out again the hail still lay over the earth in thin unmelted streaks which were lit to a dazzling purity where the shafts of light fell. The night was frigidly calm and spiritual and suddenly it seemed that the air about the white and yellow lights gave up the soul of the woman and let it soar and disappear soundlessly into the dark sky.

In a minute it was all over, and murmuring ‘Thank God!’ she sank into a chair, and sighed twice.

‘Didn’t you say something to me?’ inquired her husband.

‘Nothing.’

THE EASTER BLESSING

‘I thought you said “Good God.” But that’s not like you.’

She felt sick and harassed and selfish.

‘It’s nothing,’ she falteringly told him. ‘But in the church this morning, in one of the seats —’

‘You’re crying!’ he exclaimed.

‘In the church this morning,’ she tried again, ‘and now you come with this story —’

‘The service has made you tired,’ he said. ‘In the morning it will be all right again. You mustn’t go again this week. I agree, it’s a nauseating thing, and on Easter Sunday, too.’

But seeing that she still cried he turned away, ate something with one hand and with the other patted her neck.

‘I understand. I understand,’ he whispered as she cried again. ‘Now confess and tell me what you’ve been doing all day and that it’s been lonely without me.’

THE SPRING SONG

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All day the June sky had stretched out in perfect serenity, like an immense blue pond without a ripple or shadow. Beneath it the earth seemed to tremble like a thirsty animal chained just beyond reach of water, while between the trees sat in a sort of solemn imposing lethargy, like judges presiding over some interminable suit between earth and heaven. I took off my coat as I descended the hill. The sweat ran down my nose in a warm trickle. Thick, snowy dust rose up and clouded the brightness of my shoes just as a faint ominous haze had begun to cloud the horizon beyond the reposeful roofs of the town below. One or two people eyed me curiously as they shot past in their traps to market. Sometimes when they had gone I grinned after them with the faintly cynical assurance of a young man having made an impression, and was happy.

As I came to the streets of the town, however, I struggled into my coat again. I had the sensitive pride of a young man, too, and already, besides, the dark haze on the horizon seemed to have shot forward as if under some mysterious urge from beyond

THE SPRING SONG

the edge of the earth. I didn't like the look of it, and I began to do my trivial pieces of shopping with an alacrity which brought the sweat running down my nose faster than ever.

Finally, at a bookseller's in the market-place, I paused abruptly in the act of turning over a page. The proprietor put his face outside the door as if suspicious of something not quite right in the sky. Instinctively I followed his glance. I uttered a cry of stupid amazement which he silenced abruptly with the laconic pronouncement: 'Thunder.' We nodded sagaciously at each other like men resolving to share a secret. The next moment he left the shop and began to gather in his trays of books with the air of a conscientious shepherd.

I, too, hastened outside. The grey awnings of the market-stalls were already flapping ominously in the breeze that had sprung up. The sky was three-quarters dark under an oppressive advance of iron-coloured cloud. Beneath the awnings little pools of fruit and confectionery, flowers and cloth began to gleam in that sinister light as if afire.

From the doorway of the book-shop, to which I had hastily retreated again, I watched the market soak rapidly under an incredibly fierce onslaught of thunderous rain. The grey polish of the cobbles gave up the gloom of the sky again. One or two people flitted like dark spirits across the square, hunching their shoulders; little crowds of others clung to the doorways in dark bunches. Now and then an

THE SPRING SONG

umbrella would spring up like a mushroom in that brief, gloomy night and then vanish abruptly. Colour and movement began to vanish, too, until nothing seemed to exist but grey and a deep thunderous brown, and there was no movement but that of the rain. A clock above me boomed half-past three, like a thing mourning its isolation – then the square was silent.

It was as if all this had happened in preparation for an event – as for the entrance of a principal in a play. I became conscious of colour and movement entering the scene as if by magic. Across the deserted square there advanced slowly a white horse drawing a green trap.

I watched its approach. As it came nearer I saw that the animal's body was already drenched with rain and was steaming and in places yellow. The reins sagged listlessly up to the head, which drooped a fraction, the tail lay plastered wetly against the quarters, and in spite of its colour it looked no less oppressive than the rest of the square into which it had suddenly come. A yard or two away from me it shuddered stormily and became still. At the sight of that drenched wreck, my interest suddenly became of the most apathetic kind.

Then, from that fit of silent gloom I remember being wrenched with an abruptness against which I wanted to protest with a cry. And in the sudden emotion of surprise at finding myself confronted with that girl in the trap itself, staring out with solemnity

THE SPRING SONG

from the great umbrella arching over her, I believe I could have done so without a qualm. As it was I only watched her. In her stillness she was like a little pale image in some dark sanctuary. Only her eyes once or twice travelled quickly over the rainy road, the sky and the clusters of people about the shops and then returned to a dreamy contemplation of the horse's head. I began a contemplation also – only half-conscious of what I did – against the intensity of which her face remained as immobile as if modelled in alabaster.

Gradually I began to wonder all sorts of things about her – her christian name, why she was alone, how old she was, and as to her secret of the naive fascination in her still form. Every moment a new army of impressions besieged me. I remember wanting to say something arresting and fine in order to make her look at me. Yet I believe the slightest suggestion of a glance would have aroused me to a point of demonstrative exultation. The foolish part of it was that I couldn't explain even my slightest emotion; my brain seemed capable of nothing but one silent, ridiculous demand: 'Why doesn't she look at me? Why doesn't she look at me?'

I must have cut the most ludicrous figure. Had she by any chance become aware of me she must have burst into uncontrollable laughter. Now I am glad she never once looked at me. I don't believe I could have endured the disturbance of that serene beauty in silence.

THE SPRING SONG

Four o'clock struck. I seemed to wake with a shudder and see people crossing the road with up-turned faces and palms. I knew the rain must be stopping – but my mind still went on, like the thunder now afar off:

‘Why doesn’t she look at me? Why doesn’t she look at me?’

Above me I saw a yellow slit appear in the sky. I watched it break into great blue wounds among the clouds. Around me the shelterers were beginning to pass off and the thought of being alone on the edge of that shining pavement made me tremble as if I had been on the brink of a precipice. Suddenly the girl in the trap shut up her umbrella and shook her slightly wet hair and smiled at the sky. The sight made me pace up and down before the trap in an ecstasy of despair.

By doing so I caught sight of the name in white letters on the side and I began to repeat its monosyllable like a child at a task: ‘Dean, Dean, Dean.’ I broke into a sweat again. It seemed as if my fingers were burning scars in the covers of my books. As if expecting them both to vanish from me I continued to watch the girl and repeat that name with the pitiful desperation that only youth can summon.

Then suddenly, to end it all, a woman came up and called ‘Thomasin’ twice to the dreamy girl, then got into the trap and drove away. It was done in a moment. There seemed to be a flash of green and

THE SPRING SONG

white, like the brief unfurling of a banner, then an emptiness in which I remember standing like a dull regretful fool, with a single thought, 'It's all over. It's all over.'

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A glamorous week and a day went past. Staring up at the sky I lay dreaming away the hot Sunday afternoon in the shadow of a wood outside the village. Everywhere was silent. Only now and then the vast green temple behind me would give up the solitary song of some bird shy of the sunlight, or of another breaking out like an escaping prisoner into the bright air above. The may still splashed the hedges, as if with milk. Deceptively close and loud the cuckoos talked monotonously, only deepening the silence of a world that seemed to be sleeping under the benign dominion of the infinitely blue sky.

My thoughts were all of one thing. Sometimes when they reached a pitch of complete hopelessness or delight I turned and lay chest downwards to the warm earth. I believe I should have hated even the sun to see my face at those moments. It wasn't that I was ashamed of that incredible passion brought about by an utter stranger, but that I was infinitely jealous about its secret preciousness. And that afternoon something in the spring air itself seemed to be watching me. I didn't feel alone. It was as if a spirit aroused by some inner cry of my foolishly young heart, had crept out to torment me with all the quiet mysteriousness of its invisible presence.

THE SPRING SONG

Then, as I lay there trying to overcome by indifference my strange emotions, I became aware of another presence. A sound of feet, then a rustle of twigs was borne along to me. In a mood of wonderment I lay listening. Then a voice above me called my name.

I turned my astonished face to the glaring sky and blinked at the figure of a girl I saw there. Sitting up I recognized her as a girl named Martha, from the village. Behind her, giggling and nudging each other, were two of her friends, dressed like her, for Sunday. Angry at the intrusion I flung up into her face:

‘What do you want?’

Under the fierce reproach in the words she seemed to cower like a shy animal not comprehending a command. Her mouth looked as if about to burst into a torrent of weeping. Instead, she held out to me an envelope and asked in a faint voice:

‘Would you give this to Julian Thorley?’

I began to protest. ‘But – but why? I shan’t see him!’

‘It’s Sunday. He always comes this way.’

‘Is it important?’

One of the others broke in shrilly: ‘It’s a love letter!’

‘Sssh. Oh!’

The girl darted pitiful looks here and there like a guilty child. Gazing up into that sensitive face, scarlet in its extreme confusion, I could not refuse

THE SPRING SONG

its naive request. A week of the most agonizing abandonment to that other face hadn't hardened my heart, and I took the note with a promise. A minute later there was a sound of feet among the undergrowth in the wood and then the stillness of the hot, serene sky seemed to descend and suffocate me.

My alternate fits of gloom and ecstasy began again. The invisible spirit came out and renewed its dispassionate watch over me. Only now and then the naive image of a girl holding a pair of endless reins seemed to rise and briefly annihilate it with its loveliness.

A sound of whistling disturbed me at last. Martha's note, already crumpled from lying beneath me, was taken out and given to Julian Thorley as he passed. He took it with a smile and went on. As he turned the bend of the path and disappeared behind the wood a little shower of white butterflies seemed to fly from him and settle forlornly in the grass.

After that there seems to have been an immense desert of solitude where the mirage of a pale face constantly arose and tantalized me into pursuit of it, and at the end of which I was thirsty and tired as if from sickness of body and mind. I walked home through the dusky wood as if in a dream. My footsteps made echoes that soared swiftly up to the green roof and ran among the leaves like spirits, mocking me.

Suddenly, on turning a bend in the path, I came

THE SPRING SONG

upon Martha, the girl whose note I had delivered and already forgotten. Her lips lay parted in a sort of questioning smile which seemed to me utterly hopeless and pathetic. Her eyes were never still as she asked:

‘Did you see him?’

‘Yes. I gave it to him.’

She whispered, ‘Thank you.’ She looked frightened in the silence which followed her words. Then she broke out:

‘Did he read it?’

‘I think so.’

‘Did he say anything? What did he say? What did he do?’

Her words seemed to confuse each other in their struggle for supremacy. I remained silent. Suddenly she burst out, womanishly, straight to the point:

‘There’s something you won’t tell me!’

I couldn’t answer her. Then a repetition of the words seemed to strike my heart like a blow. I looked once again at that simple, piteous face waiting for me to blurt out a piece of information which I felt she hadn’t the courage to endure without weeping. But no longer able to bear her repeated cry I told her with abrupt ingenuousness:

‘He tore it up.’

She started wildly. A few broken sounds escaped from her and fled up among the branches. Then there was no sound but that of the languid leaves and a bird or two among them. On her face a few tears

THE SPRING SONG

glistened and dried. The lips opened in their old expectant way, but her eyes were sombre and dilated, as if she hadn't slept for weeks. I had to ask:

'Doesn't he care about you?'

Her face wore an expression of wonder then of miserable resignation. Then she whispered slowly:

'They say—in the village they say I haven't a chance against Thomasin Dean.'

In another moment I was conscious of a figure retreating among the trees. Then silence took her place. Until long after I stood gazing at the ground, crushing slowly and earnestly beneath my foot a piece of wood scarlet with ants, as if expecting to gain consolation from that deadly serious task. The sun began to go down as I stood there. A few shadows assembled darkly like a picket ready for patrol. The birds fluttered noisily among the leaves. Suddenly I caught the sweet vanilla scent of may borne in from the hedges on a faint wind. I held up my head and at once all the sensations of all the springs of my life seemed to assail me as I breathed that unexpected fragrance. The next moment I saw, soberly and calmly, that for me the significance and magic of a woman's beauty must likewise lie in a single impression of a face beneath an umbrella in the gloom of a storm. It was like a revelation.

I remember throwing up my arms with a faint sigh as I resigned myself to this soothing thought. As I walked slowly from the wood I wasn't conscious of the faintest tremor of sadness or regret.

THE SPRING SONG

Outside the evening was still and quiet, as if at a prayer. Faint and intoxicating the scent of may followed me over the darkening fields until my head was singing with joy.

Somewhere in the east, deceptively close and loud, a cuckoo called on and on, as if it were noon, and I laughed in return.

THE MOTHER

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Sometimes she is actually awakened at four or five by the muffled bumps of his feet on the wooden stairs, but more often than not she sleeps on, only a sigh or the slightest tremor of her body unconsciously marking her recognition of his rising.

She sleeps peaceably enough. Neither the jangle of crocks and spoons nor the hiss of the thick slices of bacon disturbs her. Whatever song her son bellows or whistles out above the frying-pan she does not hear. The clatter of his boots on the red floor has no effect. She hears nothing; sleeps through everything.

But when, three-quarters of an hour later he shuts the door behind his back and stamps or shuffles his way over a yard of embedded stones and mud, she wakes. Her whole body is awake. The nature of the sounds he makes on going out into the morning does not matter. Only the quick, double movement of the door is important, never failing to bring her to consciousness.

From that moment she cannot sleep. In winter she lies staring blankly until day makes slits of light in the blackness and an odd sparrow chirps. In summer he

THE MOTHER

has no sooner gone than she is at the threshold over which he has a moment before passed. Her body though old, is alight from years of sun. She stands and looks quietly, then disappears to eat and wash, her mind dwelling on him.

Knowing she cannot expect to see him before six in the evening, or in autumn, nine or ten, she keeps some sort of communion, in the cottage in winter, or under the sunlight outside when summer comes. Thus, always, her head full of shy, half-coloured thoughts, she will wait for the return of her son. He is her youngest, the last at home, unmarried and past thirty. His cheeks, brown and level, proclaim his breed no less than his tallness, his black hair, and his trousers tied below the knee with odd, dirty pieces of string.

Her body will scarcely stir through the hot summer hours. Astute, wise in matters of quietness, she is utterly silent. Her face has a strange pallor as she listens to the birds in the wooded hollow or the bees moaning up and down the dark, red-flowered bean rows. Very often she eats nothing. Her strength seems to lie within her, conserved by that quiet wisdom of the very old. With a regularity which does not perturb her, hours of thought, shadows, little noises, great quietnesses, clouds and sun go softly past her.

Evening comes, the currant bushes lie in shadow. She closes her eyes, which, behind their placid feint of sleep, begin to dance with sharp-coloured lights, green, orange and red. Her hands twitch, her body

THE MOTHER

behaves in a restless, unwise way that sucks her strength. The bees and birds cease to interest her. The light scents of stocks and columbine and the pungent whiffs of dry grasses are lost on her. With eyes shut she inhabits a delicious warm darkness, anticipant, trembling.

‘Abel!’ she suddenly calls. Abel!’

He arrives. At the window or her seat in the late sunshine she watches, trembling more than ever, her hands keeping a continual play against each other, nervous and pitiful, and sometimes she will use them to deaden the sudden rise of her shallow bosom that seems to swell up and up, beyond her strength.

Neither a sound nor movement of his escapes her. She is absorbed in the spectacle of his slushing among half a dozen swine, suddenly hungrily rampant after a quiescent day of sun. Every step of his through the dark, dung-wet earth is recorded. Her ears dwell on the sound of his voice. ‘Blast you! Keep still!’ and the storm of feet that precedes and follows it. The squeals from the lissom, dirty, pinkish-yellow draws a smile or two from her. Her body feels warm. She sniffs air, scentless to her except for that animal smell she will associate with him for ever. The suck-suck of the pigs seems to have ended. There are no sounds except those of his feet, tramping dully, and of his voice, humming abstractly some tune. On his advancing figure her watch is continuous. He slouches nearer, by no means handsome, and in every way awkward, dull, unclean, reeking thickly

THE MOTHER

of the sties. But she watches. Again that uprising of her breast asserts itself sharply. But she watches. The warmth rises, delicious, then again painful and heavy.

He comes nearer. The warmth conquers her breast and throat. It assails her head. She is numb. She wonders dully why it is she can no longer see him.

FEAR

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On the horizon three separate thunderstorms talked darkly to each other.

The hut where little Richard and his grandfather had taken shelter was already green with darkness, its air stifling and warm, and the trees that surrounded it purple and heavy with whispers. When the boy heard sounds coming from the wood he would turn upwards a pair of great eyes, faint-yellow with fear, stroke his face, and ask in an awed way:

‘What’s the matter, Grandfather? What makes it dark?’

At one time the man would scratch his beard and say nothing, at another grunt and say, ‘Don’t you worry yourself,’ and at a third, ‘You ain’t frightened are you? You’re too big a boy to be frightened. You sit still. You’ll wear your breeches out.’

But the child would never cease to cast his great swollen eyes about the hut, fidget on trembling haunches and show that he was afraid of the dark and oppressive silence and the growls of thunder which dropped into it, reminding him dreadfully of the voices of cows and dogs. So he saw nothing tiresome in repeating:

FEAR

‘What’s the matter, Grandfather? What makes it dark?’

Each time he said this it seemed that there was less to be seen in the hut, and not much outside either, where the three thunderstorms grew angrier and angrier with each other, and that in the wood the trees were beginning to open their arms in readiness to catch the approaching rain. And when this did not come the old man wetted his soft lips, told the boy he would sing him something and began a ballad.

Beyond the first note or two, however, the boy did not listen, and in a few moments the thin tune gave up its exploration of the stagnant air and the man said again:

‘You sit still. There’s nothing to hurt.’

‘What’s it dark for, then?’ persisted the boy.

‘It’s going to rain,’ he was told.

This he could not understand.

‘Yesterday it rained and the sun shone,’ he said.

‘Why doesn’t the sun shine now?’

‘The sun ain’t here.’

‘Then where’s it gone?’ he naively asked.

‘Don’t you worry.’

And again it thundered, the boy could scarcely see his grandfather and when all was silent went to the door and peered out. On coming back he caught a smell like bad fish from the dirty floor of the hut, wondered why it smelt like that and before long began to cry.

‘What makes the sky green?’ he asked.

FEAR

'It ain't green!' his grandfather declared.

'It is,' he persisted, blubbering. 'It's green like Nancy's hat. What makes it green?'

'It's going to rain,' was the answer. 'That's all. You be quiet.'

He wept again in reply. As he looked up through the window the film of his tears made it seem as if the black sky was pushing the trees down on the hut and that before very long would crush it and bury him. 'I want to go home,' he whispered, but the man did not answer and for a long while there was a sultry silence. The boy felt himself sweating, could not see his grandfather and wanted to find him desperately but dare not move an inch. And as he stood there it began to rain, at first desultorily, then thickly and with a great hissing sound.

'Grandfather! Grandfather!' He wept and ran at last between the man's dark knees. 'Grandfather!' he whimpered.

There were sleepy grunts in reply.

'Wake up!' the little one whispered. 'It's raining. I want to go home. Wake up!'

When the old man aroused himself it was to hear immense shaking rolls of thunder, the boy's voice in tears and the rain throwing itself against the window in a sort of grey passion.

'I want to go home!' the boy cried. 'It's night. Mamma'll have gone to bed.'

'You be quiet,' comforted the man. 'It ain't night.'

'Then what time is it?'

FEAR

Like a white eye a watch came out in the gloom, a bluish match-flame spurted over it and for a minute the boy was unafraid, gazed awfully at the leaf-shaped light, its reflections on his grandfather's face, the watch and the roof of the hut and forgot the storm and his fear.

'It's only eight o'clock,' his grandfather growled without ill-will. 'You sit quiet.'

But at that moment the flame seemed to get swallowed by the darkness and as if by some malicious miracle next moment appear again in a frenzied light that gave the sky a yellow wound which in turn spilt yellow blood on the wood and the dark floor of the hut. There came thunder, as if a great beast sat roaring on the roof. The hot peaceable air seemed to cry out like a sensitive child, the trees were distressed, the great confusion made the boy's head thick and hot with terror.

He buried his head in the friendly cavern between the man's thighs and there groaned and wept in darkness.

And as the thunder and lightning made their terrifying duet above his head, he tried to think of his home, his mother's cool face, the windows where there were blinds and harmless moths, but managed it all vaguely and felt that what prevented him was the storm, which was something black and cunning and old, and against which he had no chance. Only if he remained half-eaten up by the shadows and were mistaken for a dog or sack might he perhaps escape.

FEAR

And so he crouched there, very still, trying not to listen but hearing everything in a greater tumult than ever, and knew that the storm went on without heeding his fear.

Nearly an hour passed: often the boy wanted to cry out but felt as if choked by fear and darkness and kept silent. His knees grew cold, one leg fell into a tingling sleep, only his head was warm and throbbed madly like an old clock. Once there was a smell of burning from the wood, but it passed and the boy forgot it in wondering if animals were terrified as he was, and where all the birds had gone and why they were silent. Then by some lucky chance he caught the silvery ticks of his grandfather's watch and was comforted.

So it grew quiet and a clear darkness came. The boy got up and opened his eyes. The rain no longer growled and soon the thunder passed off. Outside the cobwebs hung like ropes of leaden beads and the ground was covered with great shadow-printed pools over which the man lifted the boy. From the edge of the wood were visible the blue storms, retreated far off in a mist, and a star or two in the course they had used.

'There's the cuckoo!' the man said.

It was true, and as the boy listened he forgot the last of his fear. When he tried to walk he discovered his legs were stiff, and that when he set it down one foot tingled as if a thousand pins had been pressed into it, and he laughed.

FEAR

For diversion the man told old stories, which the child heard vaguely, and when that grew stale, held the boy's forefinger in his own rugged palm and counted the stars.

'Fifty-one, fifty-two.'

And though once or twice lightning came there was no thunder, and because of the increasing stars it seemed to the boy that the storm had lost all terror for him, that perhaps he had been asleep when the most terrible flashes came and that soon the village would come and from then onwards no fear.

'I'm not frightened, Grandfather,' he said a dozen times.

Then, as it struck nine o'clock and the boy listened to the notes roaming about the dark fields, he saw a star shoot.

'A star fell down! A star fell down!' he immediately cried. 'Oh! it fell like -'

He was seized with joy, punched the man's legs, jumped into a pool and cried again:

'A star fell down!'

But his grandfather said nothing.

In the superstition that a falling star means death the man did not wholly believe, but for some reason he could not help recalling it suddenly. As he went down the hill his mind became restive, and he thought of his wife, of her death, then of his own age, his stale limbs and the possibility of his dying. And gradually it seemed he was doomed to die soon and he began to sweat, as the boy had done, and was

FEAR

oppressed by the idea of something terrible and black waiting in readiness to crush the life from him, and that against it all he had no chance but felt weak and depressed in body and soul.

One or two birds began to chirp and the boy heard them, but like the man, thought only of the star. He remembered he must ask why in the hut there was a smell of fish, if animals were afraid and where birds hid during the storm, but looking up into his grandfather's face saw it serious with fearful shadows and gleams and dared only say:

'Did you see the star fall?'

There was no reply. As they walked down the hill the man, becoming more and more stricken by the fear of death, could not hold himself still. But the boy would only laugh and while watching for other stars to shoot, wonder with perplexity why his grandfather looked stern and miserable, hurried along as if it were going to rain again, and never spoke to him.

THE DOVE

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The cage where the dove sat looking at the children had been hung just beyond reach of the almond tree, at a point where it caught the sun from early morning to late afternoon. Standing alternately on a stool they had laboriously dragged out there the children spent long hours with their faces close to the wires, their fingers seeking to touch with gentle timidity the breast of the dove, their wondrous gazes fixed upon its shy eyes.

Now and then, in voices which did not disturb the warm silence of the summer afternoon, they spoke softly to the motionless bird sitting far back in the corner of the cage. They carried on their conversations with supreme care, with unintelligible words which it seemed to them the dove must understand. They whispered names, whistled softly and clicked their tongues in order not to lose for a moment the attention of its still, bright eyes. Then for long intervals they spoke some much more subtle language, with their eyes alone, as if seeking to understand the silence and shyness of the dove, as if to arouse it to some faint flutter or cry.

THE DOVE

The patience of the boy often succumbed. 'It never moves!' he would say. And he would give up his place on the stool with a despairing sigh.

For the girl there was none of this weariness. Much more endearing, much less puzzled and desperate than the boy, she had many words and signs that even he did not understand. Her murmurs were as if echoed from the language of the dove itself. This was instinctive in her: in its two days of captivity she had not once heard even the faintest cooing from this head lolled always a little to one side, as if baffled or weary.

Like the boy she brought it things to eat. At the bottom of the cage lay the wheat and pale-green peas that had fallen there with a harsh sound, without ever being taken up again. This did not trouble the girl as much as her brother. If only the dove would move, if only it would talk to her, she thought, she would be content. And she would whisper questions designed in the softness and sweetness of their seductiveness to draw from it some word unawares, some sign given against its melancholy will.

It was the dove's sadness which also troubled the girl. For her it deadened the purple and grey of the bird's head, the green and silver of its breast gleaming in the sunshine. Once or twice she sought to banish it by thrusting a lock of her hair through the wires, as if with a sort of shy faith in her own beauty.

'Oh! why won't you talk?' she beseeched.

But except for a faint scratch of its pink feet against

THE DOVE

the perch and some low sound of its unopened mouth, the dove never spoke to them.

Sometimes, suddenly dubious of all this constant attention, they edged quietly away to within the shadow of the almond tree and listened. Only the lightest of sounds came through the stillness, only the most intangible of summer murmurs.

The silence of the dove grew terrible. 'Oh! why doesn't it speak?' they asked, 'grandfather said it would!' They had given it everything, they told themselves. It needed nothing – surely it needed nothing.

They would return in order to see if it had moved ever so slightly from its position of melancholy, as if suffering, endurance. Again and again nothing had happened. It was hard for them that this creature to whom they gave everything could not even lift up its eyes, could not emerge from this mysterious serenity so like sleep.

In unfailing hope they hovered about the cage until it was deep in shadow. They could no longer distinguish the delicate colours of the bird's breast. The pink of its feet had turned to black. They left it at last with earnest whispers, with many tappings upon the wires, and with the last earnest entreaty:

'Talk to us to-morrow!'

In the morning one of those things they had most desired had taken place. The dove had moved. It lay among the wheat and peas strewn about the floor of the cage, in a position the children had never seen

THE DOVE

before. Its feet, changed from black to pink again, gleamed like silk in the sunshine coming through the wires. The bright colours of its breast were visible again. But there was a change in these things; it struck the children so much like a blow that they gazed only once before running screaming away.

All day the dove lay in this position, its head on the floor, its feet in the air. The children did not come near again. As though resenting this strange negligence the dove never seemed to cease watching that quarter from which they had always come. The stillness of its bright eyes seemed to convey a look of hopelessness. They seemed to lack faith – they were solemn and cold.

To the children, sitting with their grandfather far away from the almond-tree, there was nothing to wonder at so much as the silence and death of the dove. All afternoon this wonder possessed them. Their little eyes were round and serious. They played with their fingers while pondering on it. Once again only faint sounds reached them – only summer murmurs, low and soft, from the trees above.

One sound, more softly persistent than all others they did not understand. ‘What is it?’ they asked.

Their grandfather spoke sleepily, as if part of it himself. ‘The doves talking in the woods,’ he said.

Slowly the children turned their eyes on him, then on themselves, and lastly to the sky. The doves talk-

THE DOVE

ing! They did not speak. Their faces seemed to reflect from somewhere indefinable a look of wistful unbelief, of sad conviction, as if knowing this could never be.

THE FLAME

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‘Two ham and tongue, two teas, please, Miss!’
‘Yessir.’

The waitress retreated, noticing as she did so that the clock stood at six. ‘Two ham and tongue, two teas,’ she called down the speaking-tube. The order was repeated. She put down the tube, seemed satisfied, even bored, and patted the white frilled cap that kept her black hair in place. Then she stood still, hand on hip, pensively watching the door. The door opened and shut.

She thought: ‘Them two again!’

Wriggling herself upright she went across and stood by the middle-aged men. One smiled and the other said: ‘Usual.’

Down the tube went her monotonous message: ‘One ham, one tongue, two teas.’

Her hand went to her hip again, and she gazed at the clock. Five past! – time was hanging, she thought. Her face grew pensive again. The first order came on the lift, and the voice up the tube: ‘Two ’am an’ tongue, two teas!’

‘Right.’ She took the tray and deposited it with a

THE FLAME

man and woman at a corner-table. On returning she was idle again, her eye still on the door. Her ear detected the sound of a bronchial wheeze on the floor above, the angry voice of a customer in the next section, and the rumble of the lift coming up. But she watched the door until the last possible second. The tray slid into her hand almost without her knowing it and the nasal voice into her ears: 'One 'am, one tongue, two teas!'

'Right.'

The middle-aged customers smiled; one nudged the other when she failed to acknowledge that salute, and chirped: 'Bright to-day, ain't you!'

She turned her back on him.

'Been brighter,' she said, without smiling.

She was tired. When she leant against the head of the lift she shut her eyes, then remembered and opened them again to resume her watch on the door and clock. The man in the corner smacked his lips, drank with his mouth full and nearly choked. A girl in another corner laughed, not at the choking man but at her companion looking cross-eyed. The cash-register 'tinked' sharply. Someone went out: nothing but fog came in, making every one shiver at once. The man in the corner whistled three or four notes to show his discomfort, remembered himself, and began to eat ham.

The girl noticed these things mechanically, not troubling to show her disgust. Her eye remained on the door. A customer came in, an uninteresting

THE FLAME

working girl who stared, hesitated, then went and sat out of the dark girl's section. The dark girl noticed it mechanically.

The manageress came: tall, darkly dressed, with long sleeves, like a manageress.

'Have you had your tea, Miss Palmer?' she asked.

'No.'

'Would you like it?'

'No, thank you.'

'No? Why not?'

'It's my night off. I'm due out at half-past.'

She walked away, took an order, answered a call for 'Bill!' and found that the order got mixed with the bill, and that the figures wouldn't add. It seemed years before the 'tink' of the register put an end to confusion. The customer went out: fog blew in: people shivered. The couple in the corner sipped their tea, making little storms in their tea-cups.

She put her head against the lift. The clock showed a quarter past: another quarter of an hour! She was hungry. As if in consequence her brain seemed doubly sharp and she kept thinking: 'My night out. Wednesday. Wednesday. He said Wednesday! He said -'

'Bill! Bill!'

She went about mechanically, listened mechanically, executed mechanically. A difficult bill nearly sent her mad, but she wrote mechanically, cleaned away dirty platter, brushed off crumbs - all mechanically. Now and then she watched the clock. Five

THE FLAME

minutes more! Would he come? Would he? Had he said Wednesday?

The waitress from the next section, a fair girl, came and said:

'Swap me your night, Lil? Got a flame comin' in. I couldn't get across to tell you before. A real flame – strite he is – nice, quiet, 'andsome. Be a dear? You don't care?'

The dark girl stared. What was this! She couldn't! Not she! The clock showed three minutes to go. She couldn't!

'Nothing doing,' she said and walked away.

Every one was eating contentedly. In the shadow near the lift she pulled out his note and read: 'I will come for you, Wednesday evening, 6.'

Six! Then, he was late! Six! Why should she think half-past? She shut her eyes. Then he wasn't coming!

A clock outside struck the half-hour. She waited five minutes before passing down the room, more mechanically than ever. Why hadn't he come? Why hadn't he come?

The fair girl met her. 'Be a dear?' she pleaded. 'Swap me your night. He's a real flame – 'struth he is, nice, quiet!'

Thirty-five minutes late! The dark girl watched the door. No sign! It was all over.

'Right-o,' she said.

She sent another order down. The door opened often now, the fog was thicker, she moved busily.

THE FLAME

She thought of him when a man ordered a brandy and spilt it over her hand because his own shivered with cold. He wasn't like that, she thought, as she sucked her fingers dry.

For the first time in five minutes she looked at the door. She felt her heart leap.

He had come at last. Yes, there he was. He was talking to the fair girl. The little doll was close to him. Yes, there he was, nice, quiet, handsome. Their voices crept across to her.

'Two seats? two seats?' she heard.

'Yes.'

'Oh! I say! And supper?'

'Of course. And supper.'

The dark girl could not move as they went out.

The door shut hard. 'Two seats?' 'And supper?'

'Nice, quiet, 'andsome.' The dark girl dreamed on.

'Miss! Miss!'

She obeyed. She was sad, hungry, tired.

'Yessir?' They were middle-aged men again!

'Two teas, two tongues,' said one.

'Two seats and supper?' she whispered.

'Whaaat? Two teas! two tongues! Can't you hear?'

'Yessir. Two teas, two tongues. Thank you, sir.'

She moved slowly away.

'You can never make these blooming gals understand,' said one man to the other.

THE HOLIDAY

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Drawing away his eyes from the window of the guard's van he suddenly ceased his counting of the telegraph poles, flashing up, down and past, an occupation which had kept him silent for many miles, and turning his back to the window brought his hands together over his knees in a soft clap-clap! and his bright eyes to rest on the bundle of whiteness lying in the arms of the girl at his side. To this he smiled a little and whispered:

‘Is he asleep still?’

The girl nodded her head cautiously as if she too had been nearly asleep and had answered thus for fear of disturbing herself. But her dark eyes were wide open, every moment making swift excursions from the baby to her husband, seated like herself on an iron trunk near the window. They were eyes whose lashes seemed incapable of ever drooping, and in which lay always a strong light, mirroring clearly the panorama of passing landscape, rained upon ceaselessly until the colour of dull steel.

There too were the reflections of the other occupants of the van, sitting and standing about her in

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dejected attitudes, watching the rain, eating, mournfully playing cards and talking in low whispers, as if sound were forbidden.

She did not talk. Occasionally without opening her lips she made quiet sounds into the face of her baby, and then hid her own in the soft hollow made by the child against her breast. Once or twice the little thing stirred, and for a moment she held her breath in fear before letting it escape her with a faint hiss that was her only sign of relief.

The train went on. The frosty look of the rain on the windows began to hide the moors and hills outside.

The girl continued to follow her husband's restless movements with her wide eyes. He, for his part, moved about in the limited space between the piles of luggage, peered through the windows and watched the card-players without taking a hand. In the grey light he looked startlingly young. Now and then he spoke to her in soft tones, which she acknowledged by simple gestures and stares, but more often, as if awed by her constant quietness, he merely moved his lips and smiled.

'Awake yet?' he would convey to her.

At this she would move the child enough to reveal its white face sealed with sleep. Thus satisfied he would turn away with an air of resignation and perform again all his old tricks for killing time with all the old interest, as if they had been new to him.

THE HOLIDAY

‘York soon,’ he once told her. ‘Change there, I expect.’

She jerked up her head, showed signs of fear and spoke for the first time. Her voice was high-pitched, not unmusical and clear.

‘Change?’ she repeated.

He turned to a man at his side and asked:

‘Change at York, do we?’

The other replied moodily: ‘Yes.’

He faced the girl. ‘Yes, change,’ he said.

The next moment, seeing her fear heighten he touched one of her hands and tried to calm her. ‘He won’t get wet,’ he urged. ‘It’s covered in there. It’s safe enough.’

Leaning to get a glimpse of the outside world he said desperately: ‘It doesn’t rain half like it did.’ When she appeared unimpressed by this he declared with a smile: ‘Not like that day at Scarborough. Remember that? Didn’t it come? Well, not half like that, not a quarter.’

He was abruptly silent again at her request and, listening to the scream and growl of the wheels and the metallic patter of the rain overhead, thought: ‘We shan’t be long now, we shan’t be long.’ Nevertheless he yawned, stretched his cramped body and knew that there were still many hours to go.

Through a hole in the misty surface of the window he caught sight of great purple lakes of heather. He turned to direct the girl’s attention there but stopped,

THE HOLIDAY

his gaze arrested by his son, pulling silently atone of her small, girlish, uncovered breasts. His heart jumped, his hands became clasped over his knees, and his knees, and his whole body took up an attitude of expectancy, as if awaiting a miracle, following every movement which passed before him.

Thus, no longer heeding the motion of the train and the murmurs about them the couple took in this sight, one with a tender stare and the other with her dark, bare head drooped over her breast.

Before they were aware of it, and with the scene still unfinished, the train reached York. There they were unready for the rush which bore them out to the platform. In the crowd the girl was distraught, while the man struggled desperately, trying to protect her as he hauled the tin trunk. The child cried with hunger.

Before long they drifted into an oasis formed by piles of luggage. There it was quieter and as the woman sat down to feed the child again the man elbowed his way to the coffee-stall and there, whenever half an opportunity arose, croaked to the attendant: 'Cup of tea, please.'

When he steered his way out again he was smiling faintly. He motioned the girl to drink. As she obeyed carefully he produced from his pocket a slab of cake and whispered: 'I pinched this. Eat it, go on, eat it.' He grinned again.

She looked up at him. The tea steamed about her white throat and clung in tiny amber-coloured beads

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to her upper lip. She shook her head vehemently, gave him the cup and held the saucer while he drank. So it went on until the cup was emptied and he took her arm to guide her firmly away.

The train ran in, to be besieged like a corpse by vermin. From end to end of it the girl and the man ran despairingly, struggling with the baby and the tin trunk. Into the compartments they darted beseeching glances. Finally they came to the halt at the guard's van, already crowded to the windows, and after more struggling the woman was able to climb in a moment before the guard signalled and followed her. The man protested desperately, then with a flash of stoicism stood perfectly still and called:

'Wait for me at the junction!'

He waved once while watching her white face diminish. After that a sense of loss seemed to strike him in the throat.

Back in the crowd, thicker and noisier, he roamed about, lonely and unhappy, until he came again to the oasis where they had drunk tea. There he sat down near the empty cup, tried to be patient under the delay, but fretted ceaselessly about the woman and the child.

The rain kept on, hissing constantly and prolonging the desolate spectacle of a railway station on a wet day. To the noise of its steadfast downpour the man watched trains and people coming and going without rest. When a flaming poster labelled *Scarborough* caught his attention he remembered that only

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that morning he had been there, and that already it seemed a thousand years away.

After that his eyes were constantly resting on the violent colours of the advertisement, and he remembered vividly the green sea, the windy evenings and warm days of the week that had passed. Many times he asked himself: why should it ever end, where was the justice of it?

The rain and the engines hissed out the afternoon.

In the train he stared from the misty windows and thought of his wife as the grey fields slid past. Already he was weary and, as the train surged on, grew hungry too. The pain of it would catch him suddenly below the ribs and pass with a dull ache that seemed to scoop out a chasm in his stomach. Soon he pressed his knees against his body.

Thus it was that his hand came into contact with something soft, studded with a few coins. With the ravenousness of an animal he began to eat the forgotten cake. As he tasted it his eyes became bright as if a raindrop had been imprisoned in each and he was seized with a strange headiness like that of intoxication. He half-choked when the dry crumbs harrowed his throat.

Suddenly he paused in the act of eating and drew from his pockets two railway tickets and stared stupidly at them, motionless as an idol. To his lips still clung a few crumbs, which moved only when he began to think again.

His thoughts were of the girl. He saw her ques-

THE HOLIDAY

tioned, frightened and detained and the railway officials unkind and impatient when she could not produce her ticket. He began to sweat with worry and call himself a fool over and over again.

The growl of brakes came like a clarion to him. He ran from the train as if it had been a contaminated prison and so down the platform towards the still, candescent spot he saw there.

A dozen questions ran from his lips as he came to the girl. When he walked away with her his clutch on her arm was fierce and devoted as hers on the child. The rain falling from the same monotone of sky he did not heed, and no longer afraid about the business of the tickets he related some of the things that had happened to him.

When they sat in the train again she fingered his brow coolly and said: 'Your head's all sweat.' He grinned carelessly, but with the touch of her handkerchief on his face looked strangely into her eyes. Soon they began to talk of home in whispers.

That night, though dog-tired, he could not sleep and lay staring at the ceiling, thinking. At his side slept the girl and the child, breathing with a soft sound like that of the sea in the distance. Hour after hour he heard this regular rise and fall until in the end he surrendered to its delusion and lived again the joys of the week that had passed. Soon he made no attempt to sleep but lay on his back, staring in profound thought about it all.

Gradually the noise of the traffic died in the dis-

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tance, leaving over the streets a tired hush which crept into the room too. Rain no longer fell and in the clear darkness he forgot that it had ever been. The weariness and strain of the journey slipped away too and he began to know no regret or worry but only a dull longing, resembling an ache, the longing for the sea again, the warm, dark nights, and the low noise of the waves over the murmur of the crowd.

And again and again he would ask himself: 'Will it ever come again?' and then in that strange, tired silence, lie awake and wonder.

TWO CANDLES

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In the early summer and spring it had been well enough: a feeling of satisfaction, of proud satisfaction, had been uppermost in him – that sense which must possess every bird that builds in a lonely tree. The nest and branches are indivisible; the wind that shakes one shakes the other, just as common afflictions bind together human souls.

Now it was autumn – almost winter when one shut the eyes and bared the cheeks to the wind. Day by day he discovered himself to be more detached, even isolated – no longer part of the landscape which appeared on the verge of complete decay. The woods, the stubble, the anæmic skies, and the sad-coloured leaves that swam through heavy air no longer fascinated him. He felt repelled, just as if the house in which he had spent summer and spring had begun suddenly to rot and its roof had dropped and grown mossy. Everywhere he sensed decay. The leaves began to pile up in red stacks which the rain soddened. Naked patches of sky were left among the trees. Only the night before last a leafless branch had begun to tap dryly at his window, a thing he

TWO CANDLES

had never noticed happening in summer and spring.

It had been a spring day when he arrived, all alone. A very vivid memory remained: of platoons of green elms, a bright lemon sun, one or two bees, a plum in blossom on the house, a manure heap steaming languidly without smelling, and a bright girl of nineteen or so, the daughter of the gardener, who had held open the gate and said:

‘It’s quite hot, isn’t it, sir?’

This greeting had pleased him. Of the outside it had been true – the sun looked down warmly. Inside, however, there had been no heat. The monotone of the white walls had been caressingly cool to his face, which the sunny wind had burnished red. He liked the house he had leased. In the bedrooms he had heard the sound of voices, and such was the quaint arrangement of the building that he had spent some time in trying to discover whence they came. It was puzzling. Downstairs they had been audible. In the corridors, too, yet it had never been quite possible, on that first day, to conjecture correctly whence they came. But of course it had been the girl Mary, and her father. All that had been evident on her bringing in tea. He recognized the voice.

That night a flaming heap of cloud had beckoned him out. Up through the chilly air one or two spirals of smoke had reared, orange in colour where the sun fell. The village had been quiet. In the twilight he

TWO CANDLES

had moved warily as if fearful of disturbing that peace and of knocking off the heads of the daisies and early buttercups.

Eventually it had seemed sacrilegious to walk about and on a patch of short grass he had reclined for more than an hour, dreaming of the house, the plum-blossom in white stars on the wall, the flies, a beetle he had seen, brownish-black, running over the threshold, the girl and her father Reuben, the cool walls, and the indefinite and far-off future.

An owl had called as he went home. Another responded, and the first became silent. It was like the call of a new life against the old, and the new triumphing. He went upstairs and, finding candles already lit in his room, did some writing till morning.

The girl woke him with three taps on his door and then went away softly. On the curtains of the deep window the sun had already constructed strange, warm shapes that threw reflections on the dark wood floor. But before noon rain had fallen. Reuben nodded sagaciously, as if he had commanded or prophesied and had had satisfaction. His master wrote joyfully.

The evening dripped into night.

'Will you light my candles early, Mary?' he had asked of her.

'Now, sir?'

'Yes, now. Is it likely to rain to-morrow?'

'Not likely, sir,' she had answered, pulling a wick straight with her fingers.

TWO CANDLES

‘Your father knows?’

‘We all know, sir. Perhaps you’ll be able to tell as well, if you stay long enough.’

He had laughed.

‘I don’t think of going away.’

He afterwards fancied he saw her smile – it may have been so. She preceded him quietly, at any rate, with a candle in each hand. As she drew the curtains she seemed an example of that beauty which springs from some inner force and is no longer merely the beauty of lips, breast, throat, eyes, hair and demeanour. Her movements were expressive of this, and in the yellow light her dark features were one by one and then all filled with it. He could explain her beauty, he found, no more than he could explain that of the sunny or rainy day he had spent in the same house with her. So far he was obsessed only by the wonder and not the significance of it.

‘How old are you, Mary?’ he asked.

‘Nineteen, sir.’

‘Yes. Draw the curtains across,’ he told her in a far-away voice.

He did not hear her leave the room. In gazing pensively at the white writing-paper he saw it become her neck just as the shadow of his own head had become her hair, moving just as solemnly and thoughtfully when the wind disturbed the candle-flames. She was beautiful. He thought of nothing else, and wrote nothing.

As the days passed he felt that beauty strangely.

TWO CANDLES

Though once or twice he caught some queer, indefinable glance from her eyes he felt no desire, no excitement about her. Her beauty richened, as if under the influence of the sun. It seemed that her face, growing more golden, heightened the white of her upper breast, while the brow lay firmer under the luxuriant hair. It became more and more wondrous. Sometimes when she brought in his candles late at night he had a desire to say something simple and beautiful and earnest to her, but of what it was he hadn't the faintest notion except that it must draw from her some equally touching and beautiful reply.

Night after night when she brought in his two candles he had that desire and yet said nothing.

On the finest days of that summer he lay in the orchard, reading and dozing nearly all day. At the far end a white goat was tethered, jerkily munching grass in a series of circles, never escaping from the stake, though the stake mattered little to the animal and was not necessary for its life. And this seemed like himself and Mary. The contemplation, the degree of resignation her beauty had brought him to, was like that rope, and he revolved about her just as continually as the goat about the stake, or as a human mind about a beautiful idea.

Now it was autumn. Under the trees the goat munched not only grass but apples which were half-rotten, and even the leaves under which some were already hidden. The nights were chilly and the days often wet and unpleasant. Sometimes, it was true,

TWO CANDLES

the walls grew quite hot in early afternoon but the sun soon vanished. Mary began to bring his candles at seven, then six. It was all decay – a decay which never fascinated him but on the contrary seemed to infest him, so that more than a fortnight without work had already gone by.

The stagnation and loneliness were becoming unendurable! He must go away again. Progress, life in sharp, warm spasms were as essential to him as sun to a bee. In this climate, with the dead days of winter coming, all that was impossible. All day he stagnated, and what was the result? There was no sleep at night, the branches of the plum-tree tapped insistently at his window, like the call of the old life.

Mary brought up his candles each night a little earlier; but it seemed to him that she too had lost her spiritual and compelling beauty. What remained was physical: he saw her features as mere essentials to the moulding of a material thing. The pervading, fascinating air of the early days seemed to have fallen away like the leaves. She stared at him with big eyes and seemed to move about in a foolish sort of dream, only half-hearing what he said. He fancied her hair had lost its lights, and that the higher neck of her dress destroyed all the noble shape of her breast. He would ask himself, had her beauty been merely accidental, momentary, due to certain lights and summer blood, or was she sad?

But one evening he informed her suddenly: 'I'm going away, to-morrow, I think.'

TWO CANDLES

She stood regarding him.

'I mean for the whole winter. And perhaps longer – I don't know. But it's too much for me here. It's dull. I'm lonely. There's nobody.'

He went on talking of arrangements and packing, and she answered him in quiet monotones which he sometimes did not hear but never asked her to repeat. She had all the appearance of a shadow, possessed with just enough life to wander about the room. She had no gestures. She did not even tap her brow with her hand, when perplexed, as beautiful a thing as the tap of a bird's beak on its own wing. Her face wore a continual expression of wonder, in which there lay horror and uncertainty too. It was as if she were afraid or mistrustful or bewildered. And she no longer had that compelling beauty which had excited in him the desire to tell her some moving, half-ethereal thought.

He was to depart at three, but events unforeseen delayed him an hour or two. All day a sense of relief possessed him, even though the air was warm and a blind person might have guessed it the spring instead of the autumn sun on his face.

Mary had brought up the candles for the last time; he had blown them out only to lie and watch their threads of smoke insinuate themselves into the dark air. Then the tapping of the plum-branch had kept him awake. The slightness of the interference, though it had gone on softly all night, had served to irritate him and wish he were gone.

TWO CANDLES

Now he was going. Mary ran to hold the gate. He had some difficulty in steering through and scarcely noticed her there, but shouted several loud 'Good-byes' into the air and waved a hand and drove away quickly with Reuben. The sun had gone. Already it was damp with mist under the trees. He felt glad to be gone.

Night came.

With an expression of sadness over her face, she walked upstairs slowly, the two candles in her hands. She set them down in his room unlit, and moved across the floor and back again, breathing profoundly.

She sat down, crossed her hands and dropped into a long stream of thought: this reached from the day of his arrival, when she had held open the gate for him, and she also had noticed the plum-blossom and the bees and the heat; all through the summer, the hot, languid hours and capricious scents, his lazy yet essential presence, his conversations – those fragile and precious links with him – the every-night pair of candles, his still warm bed she made in the mornings, certain gestures of his and pet phrases which no doubt meant little or nothing; through all this until he had announced his intention of going and had gone.

She remembered how that to this announcement she had been unable to reply. In her bewilderment she had gazed at him with a transfixed stare – which she had no idea irritated him – as if she had heard him say: 'I'm going to murder you.' Her drawing

TWO CANDLES

of the curtains had been mechanical: her retreat also. Afterwards she had leaned all night from her window, not a dozen feet away from him, in her grief and amazement gently shaking the plum-bough which ran just beneath her. She had heard it tap-tapping on something softly, every minute until morning, when she had a feeling of utter loneliness as one does on a bare landscape after a night of storm.

All that she had done before; for a number of nights she had sat up, swinging the plum-branch and hearing its soft tap as if on something afar off.

Now she swung it again. As she opened the window one or two gusts of a melancholy autumn breeze sprang in. She breathed quickly once or twice, as if tasting the quality of the air. Then she lit the candles and, setting them in their usual place, leaned out and met the little sharp rushes of air again. Her eyes, as she touched the branch beneath her, had the same wondering stare he had disliked.

Her preoccupation was so intense she did not notice that behind her one candle had blown out, and up into the air was trailing its smoke in a dying thread.

THE FUEL-GATHERERS

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The afternoon sunshine fell softly on the backs of the women advancing along the hillside in a ragged line, on their bowed heads, as on the stone spire and the brown roofs obtruding from the plain below, as on the burnt hillside, the empty corn-fields and the red, golden and dark leaves of the woods it lay with the quiet magic benediction of autumn.

Everywhere hung a great stillness as if a blessing were being bestowed upon those things: only the women, as if oblivious, moved beneath it, unevenly, stooping, rising and going on.

Each of the women had a sack with her. Sometimes a faint breeze played among their skirts and sent a ripple through the crooked line. Haunting the edge of the woodside, thrusting themselves into the hedges, straddling the ditches, loosening stumps of rotted wood with their feet, all the time the sound of their voices filled the clear, hushed air of the afternoon like the chatter of strange birds.

THE FUEL-GATHERERS

Of these women two were fat, very short of breath; thick, heavy skirts hid their feet and woollen shawls most of their heads; but like the rest their hands moved quickly, their sacks were already more than half-full. Among the others was a little, pale-faced woman wearing a man's cap, the sleeves of her blouse rolled up beyond her sharp red elbows, and above all these, in a sort of ever-vigilant, avaricious and mean dominion over them, a woman of nearly six feet strode swiftly, straddled the ditches with ease and made the deepest holes in the woodside. Her instinct seemed to take her always a little ahead of the rest, her long legs impatient of her skirts, the strings of her blouse bursting out under the immense, sudden bends of her body.

She had once advanced far from the rest. In her swift, impatient manner she set down her sack, clutched it between her knees and pinned her fallen hair in a makeshift coil at the back of her neck. Then, taking the last pin from her mouth she shouted back to the others:

'Ain't you ever coming? Good God, dark'll be atop of us soon!'

There was returned a hasty babble of voices and at last the clear protest:

'We're coming as fast as we can! We have to wait for Rebecca all the time, though. She can't get along.'

The tall woman darted swift eyes beyond her three friends and then to the two other figures

THE FUEL-GATHERERS

advancing slowly, laboriously, almost imperceptibly behind, shouted in a tremendous voice:

‘Come on, for God’s sake – come on, come on!’

But the pace of these others, as if frustrated by something much more powerful than this voice, did not increase. One of them indeed actually paused, lifted up her face and then turned her head to the others. She seemed to speak, listen for a reply that never came and then lifted her face again.

‘It’s Rebecca!’ she called back. ‘We’ll catch up soon!’

The tall woman gave up this reply with a motion and a word or two of impatience and disgust, tossing her dark head. To the rest she called suddenly, once more, with increased contemptuousness, and then picking up her sack strode on without another look at them.

The two belated stragglers came on behind as slowly as ever. Sometimes the first would pause, pick up a stick or two and cast a glance back at the other. Her very girlish face had no impatience, no anger, no meanness on it, but looking at the other figure she would sometimes sigh strangely, as if to express something between tolerance and weariness of its decrepitude, its shuffling feet, its worn, trembling hands and shoulders. Looking patiently at this face, draped like a faded yellow image in its black shawl, she would call quietly ‘Rebecca, Rebecca,’

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until, receiving nothing but silence in answer, she would turn and go slowly on again, following the rest.

As if having heard nothing, as if unaware of the existence of the other women, this old figure, bent always very low, followed the girl with tiny steps. The sack she carried had only the faintest bulge at its very foot. Her hands grasped it feebly yet desperately, like some cherished possession. She now and then set it with scrupulous care on the grass and with her hands explored the grass beneath the trees, fumbling beneath the crisp leaves that had already half covered it, and again carefully, almost secretly putting whatever she found into her sack. Her hands were very quick in closing it again. Going on once more, muttering yet unperturbed, she would muse abstractedly on what she had seen there: on the beech-nuts, leaves, wood-nuts, the sheep's wool, the few dry twigs and the single magpie's feather lying there, like an arrow of black and white. This brief, sometimes confused memory would make her cease muttering, smile and glance into the sky. The sun, falling into her eyes, would cause them to shine like very old jewels of some blue colour. It gave her expression of such dreaminess, softness and content that she seemed to belong momentarily to another existence, cut off from the women far ahead and even from the girl loitering somewhere between.

These strange actions, pauses and her day-dreams

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made her journey along the woodside a long one. Reaching the end of the wood at last she found the women grouped there in conference, the girl already with them.

The voice of the tall woman reached her first.

'What we get outside the wood ain't nothing to what we'll get in,' she observed. 'There's wood there ain't been touched for ten years. Nobody'll see us. Are you coming? It'll be all right – in the middle, in the dark part,' she urged.

The little woman for her answer threw her sack into the ditch and drew another empty one from a great pocket in her skirt.

'Ain't you coming too?' The tall woman addressed this question to the others. One of the fat women began apologetically in reply:

'I'd be about done at the end. I can't get my breath.'

'We can sit down – take our time – needn't go all over,' contemptuously urged the tall one. 'You can't go back with only one stinking sackful!'

'I can't carry two – not how I am,' declared the other. 'I can't!'

'Pah! can't you send Amos for it to-night?'

The scorn in her voice seemed to give her impetus enough to stride the ditch, mount the fence on the other side and scramble into the wood before the other opened her mouth again. 'I ain't coming,' she tried to begin. But suddenly, never finishing this half-hearted sort of protest, she set down her sack and

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crawled laboriously over the fence into the wood. The tall woman pulled her over with impatient hands while the other fat woman waddled across the ditch and stood ready to be helped too. Presently only the girl and the old woman remained outside the wood.

The eyes of the four women eyed those two for some time in silence, at first expectantly, then suspiciously, and at last with a trace of contempt. Suddenly the big woman leaned over the fence and mouthed:

‘What are you standing there for? Ain’t you coming?’

The old woman, engaged in fumbling among the leaves at her feet, did not hear this sharp demand and did not lift her head. But the girl, very immobile, her eyes wide open, a faint flush on her cheeks, replied instead, in a low voice:

‘It’s Rebecca. We’d never get along in there with her.’

Her eyes lowered themselves to the unconscious head bent near her feet, then suddenly jerked themselves upward at the sound of the tall woman’s voice.

‘Take no notice of her!’ she was urged. ‘She won’t know you’ve gone. Your mother’ll want firing bad enough. Don’t your roof leak now, like it used to? Come on!’

‘I’ll stay with Rebecca,’ said the girl.

The tall figure laughed with faint derision. ‘You’re

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frightened of being caught, perhaps? Your fine Johnny might hear about it, or perhaps you're too proud to come in the wood and gather sticks with the like of us – and your roof leaking. Come on!

An expression of confusion, of injury, of piteousness covered the girl's face at these words. 'It's not that,' she tried to stammer, 'only I don't want to leave Rebecca. And I've got enough. My sack's nearly full. I can just go steady on with Rebecca.'

'Oh! it's your fine Johnny, that's all,' taunted the big woman. 'It ain't the wood you're afraid of. Oh! I saw you come out of the wood last night, didn't I? you weren't frightened then, because your fine Johnny had his arm round your neck and was looking at you – ain't that right?' She paused, picked up her sack and turning threw over her shoulder the swift parting taunt: 'You weren't picking sticks in there with your fine one, were you?'

She ended all this abruptly on a harsh laugh with which the rest joined in, less loud but with the same air of insensitive derision, before turning and leading them through the fading undergrowth into the gloomy heart of the wood. For a long time after they had disappeared and could be heard only by faint sounds and remote echoes soon lost in the tangled arches of the great trees the girl stood looking after them, a pained flush dying unwillingly on her cheeks,

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her eyes misty and trembling, her long dark lashes shining and heavy with unfallen tears. Her lips sometimes moved faintly, as if to utter some reproach or protest, but no sound ever came. Suddenly, as if finding this task of watching and reflecting too much for her, she turned away, let her sack slip from her hands and sat on the grass by Rebecca in the sunshine.

For a long time it seemed that the clear warmth of the autumn air was the only kind and compassionate thing on the hillside. Rebecca did not move except to grope among the leaves and put odd, useless things into her sack, and never looked at the girl. But what the other women had said seemed to fill the silence over and over again, bitterly depressing her. Their hardness of heart for the things very dear to her, their reproaches, the tall woman's coarse wit and laughter, the moanings of the stout ones, the thin snarl of the little woman, and in all of them the same avariciousness and meanness in some degree, cowed the girl briefly with unhappiness and misery.

Suddenly, when it seemed to her that her tears must fall instead of drying up in the sunshine, she felt Rebecca put out her hand and touch her. The trembling gaze of the old woman met the eyes of the girl with a kind of dim but very warm assurance and compassion.

'What are you crying for, eh?' she murmured.

The girl only blinked her eyes in the sunshine.

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This movement did not seem to escape the soft gaze of the woman and in a moment she made another murmur.

‘You are crying, aren’t you?’ she said.

This time the young girl, as if instinctively, nodded quickly, parted her lips and tried to smile into Rebecca’s face. This smile fading suddenly she tried to whisper something, but her voice only choked and lost itself. As if knowing what to expect, as if understanding everything to the utmost, the old woman sat silent, watching the girl’s few tears fall and make little silver lines in the red of her cheeks, listening to her faint sobs, and holding in her own unsteady fingers the warm, young hands. At last the sobbing and the tears ended; then Rebecca spoke again.

‘How old are you, eh?’ she asked.

‘Fifteen,’ whispered the girl. ‘Last spring.’

‘You’re Rachel Blackwell’s little un, ain’t you?’

‘Yes.’ The girl nodded too.

The woman sat silent for a moment, as if lost again. ‘Yes, yes,’ she began to murmur presently again. ‘I know them all – Rachel, Mary, Till, Lizzie, Jabez – I know all your family – all of them. Don’t you cry any more,’ she urged suddenly. ‘Sit along o’ me. Did they laugh at you? It seemed as if I heard them laughing.’

The girl, staring into the sunshine, gulped before speaking. ‘Yes. They wanted us to go in there. I didn’t want to go – I don’t like them, none of them,

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— so they laughed at me. They laughed at me about — about —

Her voice trailed off, never finishing its last sentence, until her lips trembled and cleared again, and again the old woman, as if understanding everything, as if with perfect insight, knowledge and compassion, kept silent, shaking her head slowly, caressing the girl's hand, gazing with her shining eyes. She had been conscious of much that had happened in the woodside, of some things the women had said, of their greed, their coarse laughter, and like the girl she had mused on this, stoically, quietly, saying nothing, only gathering together her odd nuts, leaves and grasses, late flowers and fallen feathers in silence except for the rustle of her feet in the grass. The faint emotions she did not speak made themselves felt in tiny tremors across her breast and visible in the pale lustre of her eyes. She knew that she, like the girl, hated and longed to be away from the other women, but to none of their eyes was this hatred or desire visible. To the girl especially it seemed that during her long silences she sat on the grass dreaming of nothing, lost and enchanted simply by the sight of the empty sky. But when she spoke the girl liked the comforting sound of her voice and the trembling, almost as if shy, glances of her nearly transparent eyes.

These things set her at rest while listening to Rebecca murmuring on and on, sometimes in a curious, disjointed way, sometimes soft and musing,

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now and then clear and with words which made the girl smile again.

'Don't you go in the wood if you don't want,' she said once. 'Don't go after them. They'll come back. In a little while you can go back to your mother, only wait a little bit more, along o' me. I shall be going down soon.'

With these words in her ears the girl seemed to become content to watch the plain below, with its dry, empty cornfields, its houses and trees, with the spire of the church to which she went every Sunday rising brown and gleaming in the sunshine. The old woman fell silent too. Gradually the sun slipped across the plain, slanting long shadows across the green hillside.

'Rebecca,' said the young girl suddenly, 'they don't seem to come back.'

'They'll come soon.'

'Perhaps they won't come.'

Rebecca, without shifting her gaze, said, 'I shall be going down soon. I shan't be long.'

'Mother sent me with them. But I don't care,' said the girl. 'I'll come with you.'

She waited at the side of the old woman for a long time after saying this, watching the plain with far-off eyes, eating a few beech-nuts and with a faint pain still in her breast thinking, constantly thinking. Sometimes, as if overcome, she shut her eyes, seeing in the darkness the face of a boy and relinquishing this only after a long time, a struggle, a sigh. The

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other women did not return and under this new influence she ceased to suffer the pain their words had caused her. The face of the boy began to appear in the sunlight, the trees, over the plain. Suddenly she jumped to her feet, staring at the village beneath and cried:

‘It’s getting late. I must go home. Let me help you get up.’

The old woman, motioning with her pale hands, shook her head. ‘It’s early,’ she said, ‘you needn’t go.’

But the girl, naively eager, watching the village from the corners of her bright eyes, repeated:

‘I must go. We’ve sat here a long time.’ She saw that Rebecca did not move. ‘Baint you coming?’ she asked quickly, as if with a sudden, fresh kind of hope.

Almost as if detecting this new note in her voice the woman shook her head and said, ‘You go, you go. I can come down soon. Your legs are younger than mine. You go.’

The girl seemed to hesitate, opened her mouth and stood watching her. The woman only repeated:

‘Go, go, my dear. I’ll stay a little longer, in the sun.’

Murmuring some words indistinctly the girl glanced over the hillside, then down at the village again and at the dipping autumn sun. ‘I’ll go then,’ she said suddenly in a louder voice. She picked up her sack. ‘I’ll go – I must go.’

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Watching her depart over the hillside, her form bent under the weight of the sack and casting its long shadow over the green, the old woman's lips drew themselves slowly into a kind of lifeless immobility. Presently she saw the figures of the other women emerge from far down the woodside and straggle downwards towards the village, resting often with their great bundles, chattering loudly and laughing. The girl had disappeared and suddenly gazing at these other figures the old woman seemed to miss the lightness of her step, her shining eyes, even her tears and the sound of her broken voice. Her head full of a strange numbness, she saw the women take up their sacks and straggle off again, an ungainly line of white and black in the sunshine. The sight of this made her touch her own sack, lying flat on the grass at her side, and after gazing at it briefly, open it and peer at its strange army of contents within. Once again her eyes took on the far-off dreaminess the girl had wondered about. She took out the magpie's feather, played with it slowly, a smile on her face. This dreaminess, this sort of strange make-believe, went on a long time, deepening, possessing the woman wholly, transforming her. It seemed that nothing, not a call, promise, a sign could move her. Only once she glanced up and saw the last of the women vanishing over the brow of the hill. A faint shadow, so swift as to be either of regret or relief, passed over her face at this. Then again her face settled into immobility, into a peaceful serenity of

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watchfulness and dreams. Her feathers and flowers and grasses lay forgotten in her lap, her hands spread there also, in an attitude of protection and piety.

The sun was sinking with autumnal suddenness towards a horizon of blue mist. Still clear and sunlit the sky seemed to try to hold up its yellow orb for the woman to watch with her eager, suddenly greedy eyes. This expression, reminiscent sometimes of those of the women, of the girl with her sudden desire to be gone, gave her eyes a strong, piercing light. Suddenly as if by some mysterious process recognizing this the woman let her eyes travel over the whole sky, thinking of the women, and lastly and more lingeringly of the girl. The memory of her voice, her young eyes, her pain and her own dreaminess, filled her with delight, then sadness.

Her eyes filled, like the girl's, with sudden, lingering tears, dimming her vision of the landscape below. Regret and sadness plainly in her face now; in her weakness and loneliness unable to prevent her tears falling on to the contents of her sack, she gazed across the plain for a long time. She nursed herself in her great loneliness. Then suddenly it seemed to her dim vision that there were no longer trees, cornfields, hills and cottages lying there below, but in a moment of mysterious transformation the plain seemed to her as a great bay, utterly serene and still, the dark fields as the shadows of clouds on the water, the spire as the brown sail of some returning ship just

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at rest, lying there with a kind of serene majesty, never stirring, and the sound of the women retreating down the hillside as no more than the voices of children playing on the shore.

THE FATHER

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He was a piano-tuner. Snow was falling as he went from house to house, his little blue hands tucked up his sleeves. Already during that morning he had tuned three instruments in rooms where no fires burned and now through bleak streets was making his way to another, walking solemnly, staring with screwed-up eyes at the passing hats, letting the snow cover his fat face as it would.

Sometimes, hating the snow, the wet soles of his feet, the cold rooms and the icy keys of the pianos, he wished for night to come. Sometimes something like a lump of frozen stone seemed to lie oppressively across his chest. Now and then drops of moisture shivered in his eyes and on the end of his nose, falling on his moustache and the frayed edges of his black bow.

The knocker of the next house he lifted slowly, as if worn out. It too fell like a stone. In the room where he was admitted there was, as he had expected, no fire and he remembered that for a long time now he had no money from the people who lived there.

THE FATHER

‘Ah! well!’ he thought simply. ‘That’ll have to be looked into,’ and sighed.

Sitting down he opened the instrument, and shivering as he touched the keys, began his work.

‘Da! – da! – da! – da! – da! – da! – dadaaaa!’ he tested mournfully.

Suddenly he paused, and then tremblingly from his pocket produced a newspaper of that morning, spread it out on the keys and read slowly and methodically, his lips moving a little:

‘An inquest was yesterday held on Selina Bridges, twenty-seven, professional singer, whose body was taken in a decomposed condition from the Thames near Waterloo Bridge, on Tuesday afternoon. Medical evidence was given to show that there were signs of alcohol and neglect. Suicide while of unsound mind.’

The notice became blurred and as if the printing were to blame he brushed his hand once or twice across the page, but misjudging the distance, striking a discord on the piano instead. He tried to smile, but suddenly tears began to run over his face. His fat shoulders danced sadly in their grief. Gradually, softly, the snow on his hair began to melt in pure blobs on his temples and on his legs and boots changed to streams that curled under the piano like dark snakes.

In his misery he noticed nothing. At last the woman of the house put in her head and asked:

THE FATHER

'What's the matter, Mr. Bridges? I don't hear you tunin'!'

'I'm only cold. It's all right,' he whispered. He brought a pair of blue hands together in a feeble, demonstrative smack.

'You've no business out,' this woman told him.

'That's all right! That's all right,' he croaked. 'That's all —'

He began to cough, his eyes swelled and became an ugly grey. Suddenly he trembled and wept again.

'You ought to have something,' the woman suggested.

While she had gone out his fit of coughing ceased and he fell into a morose state of reflection, shuddering at the thought of the freezing winds, bringing the snow.

'You don't look well,' said the woman on returning. 'Not half you don't. You've no business out. I've brought a glass of wine.'

He drank some wine.

'I'd be well enough,' he replied. 'I used to be strong. I never had an illness. But it's my daughter, Selina, who's a singer. That's what's the matter.'

He pointed out the notice. As the woman read it he drank more wine and whimpered quietly. Hearing him, the woman in consolation sniffed and then whimpered too. They wept together. By and by there seemed to come over the woman, the cold piano, and the cheerless room a change and in the place of the great stone across his chest came some-

THE FATHER

thing soothing and warm. He felt suddenly that he must pour out a long stream of confidences and woes into her soft, kind face.

'She's my only child,' he whimpered. 'When she was young I used to say she'd be a singer. A prima donna, I fancied. It's nice now to think that I was right. I taught her to read and play – and then after all that –'

'Yes?'

'After all that she went away,' he told her and then was silent.

Because of the pain of all this he did not speak again but sat rubbing his blue hands together, thinking of his daughter, of the poverty of her death, and lastly of what every one knew – that once, years ago, he had quarrelled with her and had not seen her since. On his shaky fingers a tear fell and, looking like a bluish pearl, would not roll off. The woman, observing this, left him and fetched a second glass of wine.

As he drank it a soft sensation went through his flesh. He suddenly found it an unimaginable pleasure to do nothing but murmur to the woman between his tears, miserable with a warm, comforting misery, softer and easier to bear than the deadly thoughts which had moved leadenly across his brain in the snow.

He murmured: 'My only child. I remember I taught her to play. I always said she'd be a singer. I always said so.'

THE FATHER

Now, though he was aware of the poverty and misery of her death, it seemed easy to think of her as successful, artistic and clever, even that she had never despised and left him. In a little while growing warmer and less conscience-stricken, he turned again to work on the piano, permitting himself occasionally the thin luxury of a scale or two, forgetting the snow, the endless list of houses before him, and seeing the death of his daughter as if screened from it by a pleasant rosy cloud. At last he got up, called thanks to the woman of the house and, tucking his hands into his sleeves, stepped into the snow again.

Then gradually as the dreamy sensation of the wine wore off he began to shiver again. The heavy stone dropped back across his chest and bent his ribs inward in great, painful arcs. There were no longer hallucinations and comfortable miseries as in the house. Each piano he tuned grew colder. Between his visits the snow was venomous and froze him into an aching heap.

He turned in, ordered whisky, and drinking it very quickly went on.

Now at the houses the people seemed to know of his grief and pitied him.

‘Yes, it’s my daughter,’ he would tell them, ‘Selina. She went away to be a singer in London. It’s a long time ago. I remember I used to say she’d be a prima donna. It’s nice to think that. Yes, it helps.’

And they would shake commiserating heads, give

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him tender 'Good-mornings' and thanks, yet all the time think: 'That's all right. But he's been drinking again. And they say he used to beat Selina before she left him.'

The snow shot down its white bullets faster than ever. His face began to look no more than a wrinkled blue pea tucked between his hat and shoulders. His feet seemed to die, frozen, beneath him. The desire to drink again was strong.

In the warm bar he became enveloped in reminiscence and there seemed to come back the soothing air that had shrouded the woman who had been generous with wine. From the bright face of the barmaid seemed to shine kindness. His thoughts were glowing, immense in reach. He felt that he must confide in her too.

'My daughter S'lina. You knew my daughter S'lina?' he muttered.

She looked sharply up. 'Selina?'

'She used – used to sing. She's a singer.'

'Yes, I know. What's the matter?'

He muttered two words in a low voice, then closed his eyes. The barmaid stretched out her warm, soft hands and put them on his. 'So it's true?' she whispered. 'I'd heard something.'

'Yes, it's true.'

The girl's hand crept upwards and touched his bowed head. 'Don't carry on,' she said. The sound of her voice, the softness of her hands, the warm smell of the room comforted him. It seemed to him

THE FATHER

suddenly that Selina was no more than a child in a pink cotton dress, standing on his chest and pulling his hair. And his heart was heavy.

'I used to say how beautifully she'd sing,' he said.

Tears ran down his cheeks in a soft, unchecked flow. The heavy misery of his heart made him say: 'I did everything. I made her what she was.'

And though she too knew that he had ill-treated her, quarrelled and parted with her and had not seen her since, and that in misery she had drowned herself at last, the girl went on softly stroking his hair, comforting him. And sometimes, as if in response, tears fell on her hands, sighs would shake his breast, and she would hear him murmur softly, half to himself:

'I used to say how beautifully she'd sing. I had faith in her. I made her what she was.'

She listened with sadness. Outside the snow kept on falling in soft white flakes, sadly too.

GONE AWAY

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As they were burying Eli Bishop a thunderstorm broke over the graveyard. The rain which fell was fierce and sombre, swishing loudly among the yew-trees, sycamores and firs, beating harshly upon the gravestones, the coffin and the bowed heads of the mourners. All the thick summer foliage seemed colourless and dreary. The thunder was terrible, and near.

In the village, in the house where Eli had lived, little Richard sat with his nose pressed up like a little pink lozenge against the window-pane.

At first, before the thunder began, he listened only to Martha, an old woman, moving about the kitchen, to the kettle singing, and the clatter of tea-cups and spoons, wondering idly where every one had gone. But as soon as the greenish-purple flooded the sky he began to fidget, looking wildly about him and pressed his nose against the window-pane with fear.

Then, just as he felt himself begin to tremble and he heard the rain begin to splash on the street outside, Martha came in and exclaimed:

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‘Gracious me, how wet they’ll all be!’

Richard drew away his nose from the window. Where his nose had been was a pale little ring of moisture.

‘Who’ll be wet?’ he asked, rubbing his nose.

But Martha only looked confused, and putting some more wood under the kettle did not answer.

Richard got down from the window-seat and said again:

‘Who’ll be wet?’

Suddenly Martha rose, shook her black skirts into order and went into the kitchen again. Richard followed her and, forgetting the thunder and his fear, kept asking:

‘Who’ll get wet? Why? Who do you mean?’

But Martha would only say: ‘Don’t plague me, don’t whittle,’ and told him to sit down again.

Then suddenly there was a flash of lightning and from right above the house a peal of thunder leapt out and ran madly across the sky, striking terrifying echoes. After casting one frightened look at the greenish clouds, Richard ran to Martha, buried his face in her black dress, and began to whimper.

But though Martha’s black dress was soft against his face, and the way she stroked his hair and whispered to him was kindly and warm, he was not comforted. And kneeling there he thought suddenly of his grandfather, his big, silver watch, his fat old belly, his red neckerchief, his silky white hair, and remembering suddenly that for three whole days he

GONE AWAY

had not seen the old man, wondered anxiously where he was. And without raising his head he asked:

‘Where’s grandfather? Will he get wet too?’

But Martha only said: ‘Hush, hush. It’s all right. It’ll soon be over.’

Suddenly Richard was afraid of the green, stormy sky and the thunder no more. He longed only to know where his grandfather had gone, why for two days everything in the house had seemed strange and silent, and why his mother had put on a black dress and wept.

‘Where’s grandfather?’ he kept asking. ‘He’ll get wet as well, won’t he?’

But Martha only said: ‘Hush, hush, be quiet,’ and stroked his hair.

Once there was a silence and he listened to Martha’s wheezing breast, the kettle purring, and the rain swishing on the roofs and trees. Once the thunder snarled. Once it reminded him of a big drum he had heard in a circus.

Suddenly he lifted up his head and said excitedly:

‘When’s grandfather coming back? As soon as he comes back we can go fishing. Fishing’s best when it rains!’

He looked up at Martha’s face with sudden joy and began beating her knees and crying:

‘Yes, that’s it! We can go fishing! I want to go fishing!’

In his joy he thought of the broad river, the thick reeds, the willows lolling over the banks, and of the

GONE AWAY

hours he had spent lying there with his grandfather, watching the sunshine under the water and the little fish trooping in and out of the shadows.

Then suddenly Martha said:

‘Get up, let me do something. They’ll be back directly.’

She lifted him to his knees.

‘Who’ll be back?’ he cried at once. ‘Will grandfather be back? I want him to come – I want to go fishing.’

He followed her into the kitchen. When she returned he followed her back again.

As he followed her he kept chattering and looking at the long table laid with many cups and plates, dishes of gooseberry jam, cherries, cucumbers, lettuces, caraway cake and pots of summer flowers. And he felt he must ask:

‘Who’s coming? Whose birthday is it? Is it grandfather’s birthday?’

‘You be quiet.’

‘Whose is it? Why are so many people coming? Where’s grandfather?’

And suddenly, in an exasperated voice, Martha said: ‘You sit still and perhaps he will come. Perhaps he will.’

And he sat down. It was quiet, and in the quietness, above the sound of the kettle and the rain, he could now and then fancy he heard footsteps coming. Sometimes it thundered, but only far away, and over and over again he would watch the rain, think of the

GONE AWAY

river, and whisper to himself: 'When he comes we can go fishing. It's best in the rain.'

But time passed; still no one came and he stared at the ring his nose had made on the window-pane, trying to be patient.

Presently he remembered that when he had seen his grandfather last he had been going upstairs. And after pondering a moment he crept out, tiptoed along the passage and went upstairs also.

How silent it was on the stairs, he thought. And on the threshold of his grandfather's room what a funny smell there was, like the smell of a sheep he had once seen turned over on its back in a hollow.

Because of this smell he pushed open the door and entered softly as if afraid of waking some one. As he stepped inside, looking at his grandfather's big patchwork-covered bed, at its emptiness, at the walls and ceiling, and their emptiness, he felt awed at the silence and repressiveness. He kept listening and sniffing. When he went forward and looked in the bed, he felt timid and drew away again. Then suddenly his eyes alighted on his grandfather's red neckerchief hanging on the bed-post, then on his trousers and jacket lying in a chair, and lastly on his watch suspended from its nail in the wall.

He stared, then, going to the watch, put his ear against it and listened. It had stopped. He touched it and for a moment it went again, then the silvery ticks ceased.

GONE AWAY

And at once he thought: 'If grandfather's gone out why hasn't he put his trousers and the red handkerchief on and taken his watch?'

He continued to gaze about himself, especially at the empty bed and the pillow, where there was a hollow as if some one had been sleeping, and the watch on the wall.

And for a long time he remained silent, pondering. Rain was still falling, but gently and half-heartedly, from a soft, yellow sky. And soon, Richard thought, the sun would creep cautiously out over the grass, setting the meadows steaming and drying the path to the river. And still in the evening, there would be time to go down and fish under the dark willows in the twilight.

Then, at that moment, a sound of voices reached him. He listened and thought there were many voices and many footsteps, too. He had a longing to go downstairs, to see who was there, to ask his mother about his grandfather, to eat nice things and tell every one how lovely fishing would be.

He went down stealthily. In the room below was a great confusion of voices, of clattering crockery, and of people shaking wet umbrellas and clothes.

Scores of people seemed to be there, all dressed in black, all talking at once, all in the way of each other. But besides Martha, his father and his mother, he knew nobody.

He began to look about him, at first for his grandfather, then when he could not be seen, for some one

GONE AWAY

to question. And seizing suddenly the trousers of a big man with a jolly face and smelling of snuff, he asked in a loud voice:

‘Where is my grandfather? Has he come back? I want to go fishing. I’m waiting for him to come.’

But as soon as he said this the face of the jolly man grew troubled. Then silence fell and he saw that every one was watching him.

Not understanding, he cried out again:

‘He hasn’t got his trousers and his red handkerchief and his watch. They’re upstairs.’

Before he had finished three or four voices descended upon him:

‘Hush, hush!’

And suddenly, from among all the black unknown figures in the room, the familiar figure of his mother emerged, stooped, swept him up and took him out of the room. In the kitchen she sat him in a chair, pointed to the breaking sky and said:

‘There, you watch up there and you’ll see something.’

‘What shall I see?’

‘Something. You watch.’

He glanced at the sky, but catching sight of his mother’s eyes in doing so, saw that they were brimming with wetness and that her face, above her strange, black dress, looked pale and sad. And at the sight of her tears and her stained white face, he felt unhappy too and said:

GONE AWAY

‘What’s every one come for? Why wasn’t grandfather come? I want to go fishing. Shall we go fishing?’

His mother did not answer and it seemed to him that her tears were falling faster than ever, that she was not listening to him, but was clutching him so tightly he could not breathe.

But in a little while this passed. His mother stroked his hair again and looked at him with eyes that were round and lovely.

And presently, after saying, ‘You be quiet, you be a good boy,’ she left him and went back to where all the people in black were eating and drinking.

And in a little while he got off the chair and tiptoed after her.

In the room was a great hubbub of voices, a clatter of spoons and a sound of lettuce being munched. To him every one was black and looked the same. Near the window he sat down. As he did so he heard some one say:

‘A thunderstorm like that, and just at the very minute! All the flowers and everybody drenched. And the black ruined. But it’s a blessing it’s over – even the clergyman, I’m sure, thought it was a blessing it was over.’

But staring at all the people in black, munching contentedly, Richard did not understand and only longed desperately for his grandfather to come, for the rain to cease, for the meadows to dry and that they might go and fish together in the twilight.

GONE AWAY

Presently, tired, sad and bewildered by waiting, he cried out:

‘Why isn’t grandfather coming home? Where is he? I want to go fishing. I keep waiting for him!’

And suddenly, catching sight of his mother’s white, plaintive face against the breaking sky, he burst into weeping.

HARVEST

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On most evenings between April and September she had chosen this walk for her children, choosing it because from the top of the lane the colours of the surrounding land, from the time of fresh greens and yellows to the time of harvest, were soft and pleasant to her eyes.

This evening, as on all others, she rested her arms on the gate while regaining her breath after the journey. It was later than usual, though not yet dusk, and sultrily warm with the true oppressiveness of autumn. The air was so still she fancied now and then she could hear the rustle of her children's feet in the grass of the adjoining field. Even if they had never spoken, had never occasionally called to her 'Mother! Mother! here we are!' she would have been aware of their presence because of this sound, heavy and swishing, like the sea.

In the middle of the summer she had often played with the children in this field. It had not once seemed childish or beneath her dignity to lie in the grass and let them hide their faces in her skirts, then scream in her ears and half-suffocate her with hay. She had

HARVEST

never been able to reproach them for these things, had never been able to look into any one of their young smiling faces and utter an angry word. She remembered this had been so from the very spring of the year, through the time of daisies, celandines, buttercups and hay, thyme and clover. She remembered looking forward with a naive eagerness, as if she had been a child herself, to this time, each day, of irresponsible joys, of absurd laughter. Sometimes, on the journey back again, she remembered, she had shut her eyes and simply followed the voices before her in her great joy.

They had not once failed to refresh her in spirit. Now, for some days, for a reason she dare not let intrude upon her too often, she had not played with them. Not understanding this the children had showered uneasy questions upon her.

‘But why? why won’t you come? Mother! Mother! – come now!’

But each time, with a heaviness of her heart, she had refused them without ever giving her reason.

These refusals and the emptiness they made in her daily life, hurt her deeply. This evening more than all others, she felt the lack of their companionship, their soft voices, their faces hiding in her skirts. They had come to gather mushrooms. They had talked excitedly about it since morning. To miss such a simple thing as this and to feel sad about it seemed absurd, she knew, yet she was disappointed and

HARVEST

depressed by it, without being able to explain, even to understand why.

From the gate her eyes roamed over the field where the children were. Their four little figures wandered tirelessly among the grass, searching diligently. Behind them, and on all sides, extended cornfields, sloping upon the single dark square of pasture like the sides of a golden frame, enclosing it securely there as a painting worth much to her.

On these slopes she could see figures too. Now and then reached her the sound of a reaper working very late and the low rumble of wagons up and down the hill. The sounds came through the air heavily, as if of another world. Sometimes, as with the dark, still trees above her, it seemed that the wagons and the reaper laboured under a great burden, too heavy for them, which made them groan.

About her it began to grow twilight. Across the field one of the children came running to her.

'The basket, Mother – please – quickly! We've found something!'

He ran off again, hugging it to his breast. It was too big for him.

'Don't be long – come back soon, remember – soon!' she called after him.

He did not answer. It seemed to her most likely he had not even heard her. It was foolish – but she had not the heart to call him again.

She slipped back into a mood of reflection when he

HARVEST

had gone. Now, as the twilight took a stronger possession of the trees, of the distant slopes and of the sky, where there would soon be stars, she began to think more and more of the reason why now she never played with her children. She hugged herself for a long time silently, with closed eyes. This reason hurt her even to think about – it seemed so cruel, so unfair, imposing upon her so much.

For a moment she had a fleeting illusion that it did not exist. She opened her eyes and looked up. This illusion became suddenly replaced by a second: it seemed to her that there was another child in the field with the rest. She counted them feverishly: in her haste she counted five, then only four, then five again.

Suddenly it was immaterial to her whether there were four or five. The presence of this fifth one, a presence that had been for so long like a shadow, a burden, and a blessing by turns, was no longer part of an illusion. In a week or two she knew that the other children would be saying among themselves, with simple, incredulous delight: 'We have a little baby!' She saw them being led into her bedroom to peer at it against her breast.

In a day or two she would no longer be able to bring the children up the lane in the evening. Before long she would be forced to move about quietly, to live through a horror of expectation, an oppression of fears, to deny herself, yet to appear calm and fearless, as if nothing were about to happen. She knew

HARVEST

this with an unclouded understanding. For her it was an experience not to be dreaded because unprecedented, because unknown, but for the simple reason that it had happened to her before. She was aware so certainly what fears it brought, what remembrances, what agony, even the sounds, the silences – every detail, even the odours, even the attention of the nurse to her bodily needs.

Sometimes the thing more awful than all these, the inevitability of it all, made her cold with fear. It would be as if the night dew had fallen with unnatural heaviness on her alone, so that she felt cold in a world of sultry airs, of luxurious scents, of warm fruits and leaves. It became so that she was never deceived – that there were no illusions of miraculous escape from this new presence.

Dusk began to cover everything, like an oppressive, luxuriant bloom. The trees weighed down heavily beneath it, the grasses shone dimly with wetness. From a great distance came the sound of the wagons rumbling uphill. The reaper had ceased. Clouds with a dim amber light behind them had risen from beyond the hill, and in a little while the moon would be up.

She was very silent. Suddenly she recalled some words spoken to her long ago.

‘My little one, I promise you – no burdens, no troubles – only happiness.’

She remembered also the speaker’s face with the same clearness. It seemed that if she had said in

HARVEST

return, 'I promise you, I will keep a perfect image of you,' she could not have been more faithful. Now it seemed to her changed: in those days it had been not merely a face but the embodiment of all her tenderest, most feminine ideals. She remembered not only this circumstance, but others when she had believed just so utterly in her husband's kindness, his trust, his magnanimity, and when she had even, in this rapturous faith, invented for him fresh and more wonderful virtues.

And this was so no longer: she thought of him now as her husband, a being from whom she no longer expected promises and assurances.

Dusk kept falling about her, the trees hung like dark curtains against the sky. The heart of the evening gave up its sounds: the cries of her children, the rumble of wagons, sometimes the stir of leaves and the late voice of a grasshopper.

She began to whisper to herself, 'No burdens, no troubles.'

She got no further. It seemed to her suddenly that both this thought and the promise which had given rise to it were futile and unnatural. Not all these wishes, she thought, could upset the inevitability of what was about to happen to her. Dreamily, as if she had begun to wander in her mind, she thought of the orchards she had passed in the lane, the damson-trees, the apples, the long ropes of pears, the plums she had seen in the grass.

The weight of these on the uncomplaining arms of

HARVEST

the trees made her think slowly, 'It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter.'

What was it that didn't matter? she asked herself. She did not know. She bent her head on the gate.

Then, knowing how late it was, she aroused herself. The dusk had grown heavier and heavier. An orange light pervaded the east; minute by minute there were more stars.

She raised her voice and called her children. She thought that on no other night had she stayed so long.

'It's late! – quickly, quickly!'

Their indistinct figures seemed to move with terrible slowness across the darkened field. She remembered suddenly the things she must do before bedtime: little George had torn his shirt, a button had come off Edith's chemise. She must see that each of the children washed themselves and ate something and went to bed.

Out of the gloom, with the ominous glow from the east spreading through it, she saw them coming slowly. She called half-frantically:

'Quickly! Quickly! Where have you been?'

The excitement caused a pain in her side. For a moment she held herself quite still, watching the children advance just as before. She felt weak. Everything about her seemed heavy and still, a world unexpectedly overburdened with its own luxuriance and fruitfulness.

Suddenly the children paused not far off. Some-

HARVEST

thing showed white on the ground between them. It was the basket, she thought.

‘It’s too heavy!’ they called to her. ‘It’s full – we can’t carry it!’

She hurried to them and lifted the basket with its burden of wild apples, blackberries and mushrooms. The children seized her skirts, her free hand and the handle of the basket.

‘You carry it, Mother!’

Their voices fell loudly into the world of autumnal softness and gloom, disturbing echoes that ran from the heavy trees to the cornfields afar off. ‘You carry it, Mother, you carry it!’

THE BARGE

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He leaned dejectedly over the high stern end of the barge, trying to accustom himself to the smell of smoke, tar and oil, to the desolate sky and the shadowy river-banks retreating slowly past, and to every fresh swerve of the churlish waters.

The long space from where the boy stood to where the nose of the barge tore sullenly through the water was a confusion of dark shapes, of hatches and buckets, all kinds of light and heavy gear, of ropes and a sort of deck-house, squat and awry, from which smoke was pouring. Now and then, from among these shapes, shadowy figures appeared and vanished again. And like the constant slapping of water against the sides, its faint wash on the clay banks, the bridge and the five or six massive tree-trunks chained floating behind; like the damp, white mists unfolding across the water, the distant curves of the cold stream, and the smell of something wet, oily and rotten, these figures were to the boy bewildering and strange.

Now and then, watching these men, he would wonder why they never noticed him. And the look

THE BARGE

of doubt, wonderment and fear which had settled on his face soon after the departure of the barge from the coaling-station, would become deeper.

It was autumn; the air was damp and melancholy, dew was falling like small, chill rain, and on the banks the rushes would make dry, dead sounds.

The boy shivered. And on shivering he thought that up in his village, behind the coaling-station, nuts were falling in the woods, blackberries and mushrooms were plentiful, and the orchards mellow and heavy.

And then, at that moment, the barge darkened, seemed to tear at the water with a louder hiss, and passed under a bridge. The boy was alarmed, sat down with a jerk and bending his head murmured aloud. The darkness, the noise and the sense of danger were terrifying. From the black arch of the bridge smoke poured down, reaching the water and up through the smoke, reflected in the blackness, shone the light of the barge.

Suddenly, as they passed from under the bridge, a voice exclaimed:

‘You’ll get over it!’

Somebody laughed and the boy, hearing this unexpected voice, stood up at once and tried to appear as if he were used to it, as if the damp, oily and rotten smell, the cold river and the noisy darkness under the bridge had all made no impression on him.

He glanced up. A black neckerchief, some hard, dark and sunken features, long lips and dirty red

THE BARGE

eyes, seemed to be very near him. And once again the voice drawled:

‘You’ll get over, yes, you will, soon enough.’

The boy stood still, watching how on all sides black, relentless waters separated him from the land.

Then he was suddenly asked: ‘Where did you come on? At Shetsoe?’

‘Yes, at Shetsoe,’ he replied.

‘What’d you come on for? Been on a barge before? First job? Ah! in twenty years you’ll get used to it. You won’t be so sick then. You’ll be sick enough though when you’ve gone up and down, day and night, for that time. Something to be sick for, then. Yes! Not frightened, are you?’

‘No, I ain’t frightened.’

‘What’s your father?’

‘He does odd jobs on the wharf. We live in the village. He got me on here. He was glad to see the back of me.’

The black figure murmured and spat.

A silence fell. On the banks, far away, some lights appeared, danced and vanished.

Suddenly the figure moved away too, drawling: ‘You go below when you like. Plenty of time – plenty of time. You go and find out what it’s like first, down there.’

The boy nodded and, alone, kept telling himself that soon he would go down, look at the cabin and after that eat something and perhaps sleep. But he did not go, and looking out over the dark, unreflecting

THE BARGE

water, at the banks and the blurred shapes of willows, rushes and trees, tried to think of them all as a dream.

He would ask himself: 'What river is this? My own, where my father worked?' Yes, but it had changed, he would answer, it was the same no longer.

Three figures, talking and swearing in husky voices, came on deck. A little afterwards the boy stumbled forward and at the gangway stooped and went below.

Below a long, single cabin stretched, with walls varnished brown and hung with oilskins and jackets, pans, dirty rags and shirts. In the roof an oil-lamp swung, burning very low. First on one side, then another, and then on all sides, the harsh voice of the engine moaned and roared. The stench of oil, sour cooking, of spirits and smoke was here heavier, more sickening and more permanent, and now of the fresh, damp smell of the river there was no trace at all.

The boy sat down on an iron stool, looked at the bunks where he expected he must sleep and thought of nothing.

From above voices reached him. Though he could not tell what was said, it seemed he heard again the voice which had drawled:

'You'll get over it soon enough!'

At the sound of this voice he grew more dejected, and bending his head, felt stinging tears come. Where was he going? And on all the long, endless journeys up and down of the barge, what would he do?

THE BARGE

He thought of lying down, but was not sleepy and only covered his face and sat still. Sometimes he fancied he heard the wind whining above.

Long afterwards he climbed the dark stairs, came out on deck and heard again with unmistakable clearness the voices of the men, the slap-slap of the river on all sides, and the melancholy noise of the wind across dark fields and water.

It began to rain. The wind whistled and struck the water like a flail. Two of the men, laughing and swearing, advanced and stumbled below. The boy, awed, had a fleeting notion that some day he would grow like them, become black and indifferent and cease to be sick without avail for something he could not tell.

As he crouched by the deck-house it seemed to him that he must be passing through that strange, desolate land of which he had dreamed in nightmares. He tried to comfort himself by thinking that here the sky, the wind and the clouds were the same as at home, in the village above the river. But all the time he felt they were not the same but had grown unfriendly and spiteful.

He shut his eyes against the rain. Soon afterwards, glancing up, he saw that down the river lights were twinkling. Shapes of a bridge, houses and a wharf had sprung out of the desolation. There reached him the barking of a dog.

And suddenly the desire to stop at this town or village, sleep, eat and then travel no more till day-

THE BARGE

light, filled him with a trembling desperation and pain. Astern only a cold blackness spread itself, but ahead were lights, houses and a wharf, and there too he fancied existed peace, comfort and warmth.

‘If we stop there!’ he thought. Suddenly he felt convinced of this, where before he had only longed for it.

Then conviction, longing and a fear of not stopping grew into confusion again.

The barge seemed doubly clumsy and slow. ‘Are we pulling in, are we moving?’ he asked. Only the dark banks, the willows and horizon gliding past showed that the barge was approaching the lights and would pass under the bridge.

Gradually, from a desolate, rainy darkness the barge drew from beneath the bridge into a darkness which, though rainy too, was split by lights and shapes, by silver drops, by dancing reflections and eddies on the black waters. In the shadow of the jetty strings of boats were moored and above the light, above everything, could be seen a church, like a shrouded mast, against the sky.

All these, too, began to glide past as the willows, the reedy banks and the horizon had done. The only difference seemed to be that they passed more stealthily, more steadily and inevitably, and, if possible, more soundlessly, too.

No one came on deck. The barge passed beyond the jetty, out of reach of first the reflections of the light, then the lights themselves, dragging its long

THE BARGE

burdens and itself with a swishing sound and a moan.

The lights vanished utterly. The boy became aware again of blackness on all sides and an unceasing advance into blackness; of a feeling of disappointment, then sadness, then despair; of recurring willows, bends and bleak meadows; and suddenly of a deep, unconquerable longing for the face of his father, who had been glad to get rid of him, the filthy cottage where he had quarrelled and slept with his brothers, the red woods with their falling nuts, and the village where all the streets were now in darkness, so unlike this, so unlike all others.

It seemed to grow colder. From below he caught the sound of voices. But to get up, go down and confront these faces he did not know but already hated seemed too much for him. Most of all he felt he could not face the figure who had drawled: 'You'll get over it!'

And he lay still. The rain beat steadily over his face, the barge and the black waters, and fell among the reeds, hissing. The wind whined down the river. And every now and then the barge would give a sudden and greater lurch forward, as if impatient to be nearer morning, daylight and the open sea.

THE LESSON

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Miss Stephens, the music mistress, had all day taken the strictest measures to preserve her self-control. For instance she acted slowly, frequently bit her lips and between the lessons ran from the room, hurriedly dabbed her eyes with wet finger-tips and then dried them with careful dabs of the towel. But the moment Miss Beam saw and reprimanded her this had to stop.

'You really mustn't scamper about between lessons, Miss Stephens, you really mustn't!'

'I've a headache,' she excused herself.

'Then calmness and self-control are the best things, not this running about!'

'It's annoying,' Miss Stephens told herself on walking back. 'I can't tell whether the children sing A or A flat, I really can't do it.'

Nevertheless she would frantically beat some sort of time while the children, with heads back and mouths gaping like suffering fish, sang songs and exercises to her as if she were a goddess.

'A little higher!' she would bawl above the din. 'A little high-er! You're not on the pitch. The pitch, now! . . . Stop!'

THE LESSON

The chorus would cease raggedly.

'It's important,' she would say. 'It's very important that you should open your mouths. Not only that, but open them in the correct way. Now sing "Ah!"'

'A-a-a-a-h!' sang the children.

'Now oooh!'

'O-o-o-o-h,' boomed the children.

She cut them off abruptly.

'The mouth must be rounded in the right way. Don't sing through your teeth. That's as bad as singing in prison! You must have freedom. Now once more, "Ah!"'

'A-a-a-a-h!'

'Stop! There's no freedom. You're not in prison. Open wide!'

Thus it had gone on all the morning.

Now, after what seemed an eternity, afternoon had come. Long panels of light lay sleepily across the floor of the room, and into the thick summer air the children's voices soared in dreamy tones. Miss Stephens beat time with a little black baton that was like a bird bobbing up and down in mockery. With her other hand she did nothing and it lay in the left-hand pocket of her skirt as if the wrist were sprained.

Even when she beat frenziedly at the faces of the children and yelled 'Higher! there's still no freedom!' the other hand remained utterly still and invisible.

But in the drowsiness no one seemed to see it. As if it were too much to notice moving things like the

THE LESSON

baton, let alone the still ones, some of the children sang with eyes shut. But she let them go on without reprimand. Sometimes she even forgot they were singing to her and everything suddenly became of the substance and significance of a dream, in which it seemed she was a witch stirring mobs of spirits to madness. She actually imagined she saw them begin a caper, but everything went drowsy again, the faces of the children seemed to shimmer like under great heat and she could think of nothing to do but bawl:

‘Higher! more freedom!’ and gesticulate furiously with one hand while the other lay out of sight and still.

At the end of the lessons she no longer bathed her eyes but sat dreamily near the piano, where she drew out her left hand and began to read the note it held. As it flashed a reflection in the dark surface of the piano flank she tried to invest it all with fresh meaning.

The note was hard, its firmly constructed sentences she read in a dazed way: ‘I’m sure you would not wish me to continue a deception which for some time past has been painful to me. I no longer love you. If there is anything you think I could do at any time . . .’

The letters seemed to shiver from their own coldness and in the polished darkness of the piano the reflections went absolutely still. Some one came in and said, ‘Miss Stephens, I want “Blow, blow thou winter wind!”’ but on getting no answer within a

THE LESSON

minute went away again. She seemed to shrink into an infinitely small heap even at the thought of being asked to move.

‘A deception painful to me,’ rang in her mind.

And she did not move. At one of the windows a sparrow tapped, spoilt her composure and set her thinking. She remembered the years she had known him, the day when he had first said ‘I promise, on my honour, I love no one else,’ and running a finger-nail down the parting of her hair had called her *Anthea*, then *Daphne*, which she liked more and thought in keeping with her tall figure.

All that time she had been teaching at the school and the singing lessons had been breathless and gay occasions on the basis that when one is happy the desire for something quick and joyful is irresistible. And she would assure herself constantly: ‘In a year or two I shall be married and be able to leave the school. I can’t imagine, even, what it will be like without the lessons!’

Then she had been able to announce: ‘I’m engaged. I became engaged on Sunday,’ and in the common-room had argued about the stone in the ring as zealously as about a chord in a chopin waltz.

‘I shall be married in a year or so!’

In a sort of tempestuous glee she had flung instructions to the gaping classes and chose the most sentimental songs.

Suddenly she found it impossible to conceive life without love, and all at once remembered on one

THE LESSON

occasion laying her finger-tips on his cheek and kissing him. Now, of course, it meant that she had been unutterably silly to grow thus intimate with a man who had said, 'I promise on my honour!' and then had written 'a deception which has for some time past been painful to me.'

It seemed distant and soulless. What seemed immediate and real was the idea that in all probability she had six or seven, thirteen or fourteen, even nineteen or twenty years of the school to look forward to. Even nine or ten days loomed like an eternity. She was not beautiful, was sometimes even sentimental and in the common-room they thought her a child, though she was nearly thirty, and treated her condescendingly.

She sat there thinking, and her feet, which protruded from the shadows into the sunshine, grew unbearably hot, throbbing like her head. Musing, she tried to be resolute and dispassionate, but felt lonely and thoughtless instead. Somewhere in the distance it seemed the children had begun to clatter down towards her and would be round her in a minute. Half-mechanically she dropped her left hand into her pocket and at the same moment heard a bee and a sparrow begin humming and chirping drowsily against each other.

Before the children came a long time seemed to pass, but they filed in at last, sat like birds, chattered and eyed her curiously and wondered why she did not move.

THE LESSON

‘Miss Stephens!’ rang out the voice of Miss Beam, ‘the next lesson, please!’

The bee and the sparrow became suddenly quiet, the long stretches of light on the floor insufferably bright and hot and the children very silent, as if expectant.

‘The next lesson, please!’ half-shouted the Head Mistress. ‘Please!’

‘I’m sorry. Yes.’

She rose and coughed, for a moment stared stonily at the blue sky through the windows, then in a little while began to beat, calling across the rows of singing heads:

‘Higher! Open your mouths. You must have freedom! More freedom! Freedom!’

And the second lesson went on.

THE SCHOOLMISTRESS

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HAVING at last made the decision which had kept her quiet there for the last half-hour, the little schoolmistress rose from the dressing table, her grey hair shining a faint silver under the candle-light and, leaving the room, went downstairs with the candle in her hand.

At the foot of the stairs, after putting her hand on the door-knob, she blew out the light and entered the room. A whitish coil of smoke danced up before her face. She seemed to wait with resignation for it to evaporate, then, when it had done so, and finding herself staring at the figure of her friend Miss Hallett, seated by the fire, became suddenly confused and nervous and could do no more than whisper when she had intended to speak in her firm, habitual voice.

‘We had better begin to get ready, Miss Hallett, hadn’t we?’ she said.

The other little woman, dressed as neatly but more brightly and stylishly than the schoolmistress herself, let a little smile pass across her less faded lips before replying:

THE SCHOOLMISTRESS

‘Yes. We’d better begin. I’m excited already, aren’t you?’

Nodding gently, the schoolmistress went and sat down at her side. Twice she prepared to speak but could get nothing to pass her frail little lips. She moved her head jerkily from side to side and then finally, pressing her hand to her temples, burst out:

‘Miss Hallett, I’ve something to say. You know where we’re going to-night, of course. It’s not often anything happens to us like this. And you know why we’re going to the party, too, don’t you?’

‘It’s because the headmaster has been here twenty-five years, isn’t it? Think of it – twenty-five years. It doesn’t seem possible.’

The schoolmistress lowered her eyes. ‘Yes, but it is. I remember it. I was here when he came.’

‘You were here?’ The other raised her eyebrows. ‘Then you’ve been here twenty-five years too!’

The schoolmistress let a smile pass over her lips also. ‘Not twenty-five – nearly thirty,’ she whispered.

‘Thirty! I didn’t know! Then the party ought to be in your honour too!’ exclaimed the other.

‘No, no!’ The little lips trembled in protest. ‘I was away nearly a year – I was ill. The years aren’t consecutive. Then, besides –’ she hesitated, her voice dropped a little, ‘– I was only a girl when I came – only on probation. Mr. Unwin came officially to be schoolmaster – it’s quite different.’

She begged the other suddenly, with only half-

THE SCHOOLMISTRESS

coherent whispers, with little touches and gestures, and lastly with a smile, to say nothing of this. She desired no honour, she said. Then, with the nervous jerkiness which had been so much part of her since entering the room, she produced a little parcel which during all that time she had somehow kept hidden, and gave it into the other's hands.

'Open it, open it,' she whispered. 'It's something – something – something to commemorate our long friendship – only a little thing. But I can't help it.'

The other woman, astonished, unwrapped the parcel slowly. With a rustle the paper fell away from the object within. With wide, very nearly sad eyes the schoolmistress watched this held up to the light, a little comb of tortoiseshell, embellished with silver and studded with a single diamond. It seemed to her like a gleam of deep, uneven gold with another flash, clear and silver, bursting from it. Before the other had time to speak she was whispering again:

'I've had it ever since I came here – ever since I was a girl. I used to wear it then.' Her voice became tremulous, as if with tears. 'Now I'm too old – and you can have it. Yes, you have it. We've been such friends. It will do to remember me by.'

At this point there were tears in her eyes too. Now and then an unusually heavy sigh would drag its way up her breast, where the lace would flutter, and find her lips in a faint and poignant sound. Suddenly Miss Hallett raised her voice.

'Oh, Miss Joyce, what can I do to thank you? It's

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too good of you. Indeed – I don't know what to say. It's I who should give something to you.'

'It's nothing.' The schoolmistress, as she uttered these words, sought the other's hands, grasped them with unexpected fervour and, still crying a little, rose from her chair and said:

'Now I'm going to dress for the party. Don't say anything – keep it, take care of it.'

So simple, so unpretending, yet so difficult for her to say, these words seemed to reach the other woman as a reproach might have done. In another moment as if unable to bear them, she groped for and seized the schoolmistress's hand and, pressing it against her own, murmured confusedly a long, soft string of thanks and protestations. During all this the comb lay clutched in her hands, imprisoned between their frail, sunken breasts, like some symbol joining or separating them. Suddenly the schoolmistress, as if fearful of breaking down under this, murmured again:

'Let me go and dress now.'

She gently released her hand and, casting back a single glance at the tortoiseshell comb, seized the candle and went upstairs again, upset but happy.

She remembered while dressing how she had feared this scene, how foolish it had sometimes seemed to her, how painful had been even the thought of giving away the comb which she had not worn for so long. Then she remembered how long she had lived with Miss Hallett – she thought it must

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be nearly twenty years. Sunday after Sunday they had been to church together. Every winter they had taken care of each other. They had chosen their clothes together: she had humoured Miss Hallett in her desire for colour, and Miss Hallett had looked kindly on her austere and unpretentious fashions. She found it difficult to dress under the weight of these memories and of the memories of her life at the school, where she had taught for so long. Her hands trembled with the hooks and buttons of her stiff silk dress. Even her hair had a look of trembling when she combed it and the lace at the neck of her dark dress seemed to quiver. When she put on her spectacles the eyes beneath them, in the candle-light, were never still. Her face assumed an expression poised, as it were, between expectancy and regret.

She could see that Miss Hallett was excited too. In the sitting-room, in the passage and the street and finally in the hall where the party was being given in honour of the headmaster, her eyes danced, she could not keep her hands still.

But the schoolmistress's feeling of half-regret, half-expectancy, did not pass. Something, she could not tell what, kept her from smiling even so much as she habitually did. She would touch her spectacles, finger her breast and stammer when people spoke to her. All the timid, nervous creature in her seemed to rise to the surface, as if the party were being given in her honour.

Together she and Miss Hallett shook hands with

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the schoolmaster. Unable to say the words which she knew she ought to say, she blushed darkly and pressed her hands together. But Miss Hallett remained self-possessed, talking gaily, extending congratulations, resting her eyes for long moments on the schoolmaster's face.

'We were saying it doesn't seem possible – twenty-five years! I should never dream it. We're all so proud of you. We know what such a long service means, what troubles and disappointments.' She went on like this for a long time, then said at last: 'Ssh! Now they are going to begin – they are beckoning you to sit at the head of the table – at the place of honour, you know. You'll have to leave us.'

As the schoolmaster walked to the end of the room there was a clapping of hands. He took up his position behind a chair which had been decorated with gold tissue paper and raised a little above the rest. The eyes of the guests followed him deferentially.

Only the schoolmistress was not watching him. All about her, she knew, were the important people of the town and district, the mayor and mayoress, the clergymen, the education authorities and other teachers, the local councillors, the schoolmaster's closest friends. She knew they must notice her standing with her hands hanging motionless at her sides, as if stupid, and with her eyes on Miss Hallett's hair.

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Yet she did not care. She even moved her lips in a timid but astonished whisper: 'She is wearing the comb!'

Even after the clapping had ceased and the party had begun, this thought kept repeating itself. For long intervals she could not take her eyes away from Miss Hallett's head. She tried to cover her confusion by eating, by staring at the festoons on the wall, by listening to the babble of voices about her. But her eyes returned constantly to the comb in Miss Hallett's hair, flashing and gleaming there with its glossy gold and brown, its silver edge, and its diamond. She tried again and again to regard this as an hallucination, but always without success. The reality of it forcing itself upon her at last she endeavoured to persuade herself into the belief that she had no longer any interest in it. She had given it away! It was hers no longer! Yet the timid, unassuming creature in her was shocked and hurt. She seemed to see suddenly the meaning of Miss Hallett's excitement, of her assurance, her unfaltering congratulations, of the ease with which she talked to the schoolmaster and looked into his eyes.

She thought of the distress of mind which had taken place in her before she had given up the comb. Every new gleam and flash brought a return of some pang she had suffered while making her decision. She thought of the happiness she had felt when Miss Hallett had seized and caressed her head and hands.

The eating came to an end at last. The mayor and

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some of the most important people stood up and made speeches. The schoolmistress saw and heard them dimly, as if cut off from them by some impenetrable cloud. Now, more often than ever, her eyes came to rest on Miss Hallett. In her hair the comb seemed to send out ever brighter flashes of tortoiseshell and silver. The diamond gleamed like a cold eye. She seemed to float helplessly in a torrent of memories which each of these things began.

Miss Hallett's eyes never left the schoolmaster's face. To the schoolmistress there was something not simply distasteful in this, but something cruel, shocking, and nauseating because cheap and vulgar. She began gradually, as the evening went on, to see in some one else the personification of all those things she had all her life tried to suppress in herself. All Miss Hallett's protracted gazes, all her excitement, her eagerness to be attracted and noticed by every one, the schoolmaster especially, revolted her. She knew she had seen these things, though in a less degree, in Miss Hallett already – in her love of colour and the finer clothes she wore. To-night they were not only more marked but made sharp and insufferable by the existence of the comb in her hair.

She asked herself again and again what she could do. She pondered deeply while watching Miss Hallett moving among the guests, talking gaily with the mayor, the councillors, and lastly with the schoolmaster himself.

It struck her suddenly, as she watched her des-

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perate attempts to seduce a smile from him, as she saw her white hands fluttering about her breast as she flattered him with her long glances, that all this was pathetic. How pathetic and how desperate too! It seemed as if Miss Hallett were breaking down all her dearest and finest reservations and surrendering everything to him, from her finger-tips to the comb the schoolmistress had given her. And because pathetic as well as cruel and shocking, she felt it defeated her every resolve to remonstrate, to demand, to beseech that it might end.

She moved about slowly, talking listlessly, watching Miss Hallett emerge from one group and another, always with her desperate smiles and gestures, always with the tortoiseshell comb flashing in her hair.

Presently Miss Hallett came across the dazzling floor and spoke quickly:

‘The schoolmaster wants to know just how many years you’ve been at the school,’ she said.

Her eyes were alight, as if with some unspoken because too intense delight. The schoolmistress shook her head.

‘I don’t remember, I don’t remember,’ she stammered.

‘But you must tell him!’

Aware suddenly that she would be forced to say something at this moment, the schoolmistress tried to begin her reproaches, her entreaties.

‘You’re wearing the comb I gave you – you look so – so –’

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She gave up in despair. Miss Hallett smiled quietly at this confusion and said:

'Yes, I know, I know. But what shall I tell him?'

'Tell him I don't remember – I don't remember. I don't want any honour.'

She felt that she could say nothing else, could utter not the faintest reproach, could not even suggest the horror, the revulsion, the pain and despair which filled her. She brought her hands together and watched Miss Hallett cross the shining floor to where the schoolmaster stood. Suddenly, under the light, the comb flashed its brightest gleam. It covered her suddenly with a feeling of inability to move or speak, a sense of how childish she was, how absurd. Standing quite still she thought of all the years she had spent in the school, of how she had worked diligently, conscientiously, hand in hand with the schoolmaster, until she had had all the infants under her care, of how she had saved her money, contributed every year to the pensions' fund and had earned the respect of every one.

Now it seemed to her that she had lost this, had lost everything, even the most precious link with her girlhood, even her faith in life itself. Her emotions were so strong she felt she must cry.

'Now I have nothing, I have nothing!' she whispered.

But there was not a sound from her lips. At the far end of the room there was laughter and some one gave out a toast. Expressionless, mute, wondering,

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she stood there until the wine was brought. Then she took it and responding to the toast, drank it slowly, and standing where she was, her spectacles shining vacantly, her mouth open, as if ready to cry out, clutched her empty glass in her hands.

FISHING

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It was summer. The hot, still days were followed by evenings of a lovely sultry peacefulness scented with mown hay, dog-roses and clover. The river, day and night, looked as if it slept between its rows of still, luscious green reeds.

Two old friends since youth, Will and Matthew, would often on such evenings walk out together as far as the woods, across the cornfields, along to the edge of the marshes or by the river. They were widowers and all the time talked tenderly of the past, deploring the present and recalling wistfully memories of early days.

When they walked by the river, sat on the towing-path gates or leaned over the bridge they talked of fishing. They talked, as well, of otter-chasing, of snipe, wild-duck, kingfishers and reed-pipers, of the strange cries of meadow-crakes and owls, of all those things in their lives which were now no more than memories.

On the bridge one evening, as they watched the flies dancing over the clear, dark surface of the stream

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and the water flapping sleepily against the reeds and willow-roots, Will pointed and said:

‘Under that willow I’ve caught scores of eels.’

‘I’ve been with you,’ said Matthew, shaking his head, ‘often and often.’

‘Used to lay the lines overnight,’ went on the other. ‘Every summer.’

‘And then come in the morning before it was daylight.’

‘Yes, come in the morning before it was daylight, and take the eels.’

This brief, wistful reflection made them silent. It was between sunset and the summer darkness. Under the bridge the water looked already black and oily, but on Matthew’s watch-chain a medal he had won for fishing still gleamed brightly and the air was still intoxicating and full of warmth.

In the heavy stillness their voices were a dull murmur.

‘What times we had! How many times I’ve been on my belly under that tree!’

They kept glancing up at the willow-tree. A flock of birds went over, heading for the green sky above the sunset. Everywhere was silent.

And then suddenly Matthew exchanged a glance with Will, dropped his gaze to the river again and said:

‘Could we catch eels now?’

Without a pause Will exclaimed: ‘Catch eels! There’s nothing in it.’

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'I've been thinking –'

'You just give me an eel-line and I'll peg it with my eyes shut – and there'd be fish too, mind you.'

Another and even more murmurous, wistful silence came over the river after these words. Then Matthew spoke:

'I've been wondering whether we shouldn't lay a few lines under that willow-tree,' he said.

'Give me a line, I say, and I'll peg it and there'll be fish.'

'Shall we?'

'You give me a line.'

Will seemed to gaze into the cool sky with longing. Matthew said: 'Let's go, then. Up in my old loft there's a few lines hanging.'

But for a moment they did not go. In silence they remained watching the twilight creeping over the water, over the meadows, over the sky itself, turning the reeds to black tapers, making the river gleam like quicksilver. And to both the thought of setting eel-lines, coming down before dawn and taking out the fish was for a moment too entrancing to be true.

Presently, however, they did go. In the river, as they crossed the bridge, Matthew's shadow was curved, with a white top, and though Will's was straighter and stiff, like a drumstick, it too was white at the head.

Going up into the village between thick rows of hawthorn and elder, a smell of honeysuckle reached them.

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'It's best to get there by four o'clock,' Matthew kept saying.

'We will. That's the best time; I know it is.'

'If only my old lines don't break!'

As they entered the village, came to Matthew's house, got out the lines and examined them, it seemed to both that they were about to do once again something splendid, adventurous and full of joy. They dug out worms.

When they returned it was still not late, though Matthew's watch-chain, the sky, the dog-roses all shone fainter than before. Only the smell of honeysuckle seemed stronger and more intoxicating.

The river looked more like dark oil than ever. The reeds, the water-grass and the willow-tree had turned quite black. Matthew kept stumbling over hoof-marks.

As Will knelt down, stretched on his belly and began to drop the lines into the water, he thought: 'The grass seems damp.' Matthew, on kneeling beside him, thought so too. But they said nothing to each other.

One after another the lines plopped, sank and were made secure to the edge. With their ears so close, Matthew and Will could hear the rustle of weeds and of water creeping between.

They got up off their knees. Still it seemed to them, as they returned stumbling along the bank, that to set eel-lines at night, wake at four, and in the fresh summer dawn take home their load of fish, was

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as pleasant and exciting as it had been in their youth, and they talked of all the longest eels they had ever caught.

At Matthew's gate they reminded each other:

'At four, sharp. No later than four.'

And as their white old heads bobbed away from each other in the warm dark, Matthew remembered and called:

'Bring a basket! Don't forget! . . .'

In the morning, at dawn, a chill hangs over the river, the water looks cold and like steel, and the grass, the dog-roses and the honeysuckle are drenched in dew. From the east to the zenith a cold pink light spreads reluctantly, but there is no warmth and the leaves shiver. Now the reeds droop, looking a dirty, dishevelled green and with a rustling sound shudder and sway.

Among them, in the deep water under the willow-tree, five or six empty eel-lines sway backwards and forwards, first in the grey light, then in the rose, then in the soft early sunshine pouring from the blue sky.

Birds wake, cattle pass across the meadows, in the village a bell rings for an early service. But along the river-path nobody comes.

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It was afternoon: great clouds stumbled across the sky. In the drowsy, half-dark room the young girl sat in a heap near the window, scarcely moving herself, as if she expected a certain timed happening, such as a visit, sunset, a command. Slowly she would draw the fingers of one hand across the back of the other, in the little hollows between the guides, and move her lips in the same sad, vexed way in which her brows came together. And like this too, her eyes would shift about, from the near, shadowed fields, to the west hills, where the sun had dropped a strip of light, and to the woods between, looking like black scars one minute, and like friendly sanctuaries the next. It was all confused. There was the room, too. The white keys of the piano would now and then exercise a fascination over her which would keep her whole body perfectly still for perhaps a minute. But when this passed, full of hesitation, her fingers would recommence the slow exploration of her hands, and the restlessness took her again.

It was all confused. She was going away: already she had said a hundred times during the afternoon –

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'I am going away, I am going away. I can't stand it any longer.' But she had made no attempt to go. In this same position, hour after hour had passed her and all she could think was: 'To-day I'm going away. I'm tired here. I never do anything. It's dead, rotten.'

She said, or thought it all without the slightest trace of exultation and was sometimes even methodical when she began to consider: 'What shall I take? The blue dress with the rosette? Yes. What else? what else?' And then it would all begin again: 'To-day I'm going away. I never do anything.'

It was true: she never did anything. In the mornings she got up late, was slow over her breakfast, over everything – her reading, her mending, her eating, her playing the piano, cards in the evening, going to bed. It was all slow – purposely done, to fill up the day. And it was true, day succeeded day and she never did anything different.

But to-day something was about to happen: no more cards in the evening, every evening the same, with her father declaring: 'I never have a decent hand, I thought the ace of trumps had gone! It's too bad!!' and no more: 'Nellie, it's ten o'clock – Bed!' and the slow unimaginative climb of the stairs. To-day she was going away: no one knew, but it was so. She was catching the evening train to London.

'I'm going away. What shall I take? The blue dress with the rosette? What else?'

She crept upstairs with difficulty, her body stiff

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after sitting. The years she must have sat, figuratively speaking, and grown stiff! And as if in order to secure some violent reaction against it all she threw herself into the packing of her things with a nervous vigour, throwing in the blue dress first and after it a score of things she had just remembered. She fastened her bag: it was not heavy. She counted her money a dozen times. It was all right! It was all right. She was going away!

She descended into the now dark room for the last time. In the dining-room some one was rattling tea-cups, an unbearable, horribly domestic sound! She wasn't hungry: she would be in London by eight – eating now meant making her sick. It was easy to wait. The train went at 6.18. She looked it up again: 'Elden 6.13, Olde 6.18, London 7.53.'

She began to play a waltz. It was a slow, dreamy tune, ta-tum, tum, ta-tum, tum, ta-tum, tum, of which the notes slipped out in mournful, sentimental succession. The room was quite dark, she could scarcely see the keys, and into the tune itself kept insinuating: 'Elden 6.13, Olde 6.18,' impossible to mistake or forget.

As she played on she thought: 'I'll never play this waltz again. It has the atmosphere of this room. It's the last time!' The waltz slid dreamily to an end: for a minute she sat in utter silence, the room dark and mysterious, the air of the waltz quite dead, then the tea-cups rattled again and the thought came back to her: 'I'm going away!'

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She rose and went out quietly. The grass on the roadside moved under the evening wind, sounding like many pairs of hands rubbed softly together. But there was no other sound, her feet were light, no one heard her, and as she went down the road she told herself: 'It's going to happen! It's come at last!'

'Elden 6.13. Olde 6.18.'

Should she go to Elden or Olde? At the cross-roads she stood to consider, thinking that if she went to Elden no one would know her. But at Olde some one would doubtless notice her and prattle about it. To Elden, then, not that it mattered. Nothing mattered now. She was going, was as good as gone!

Her breast, tremulously warm, began to rise and fall as her excitement increased. She tried to run over the things in her bag and could remember only 'the blue dress with the rosette,' which she had thrown in first and had since covered over. But it didn't matter. Her money was safe, everything was safe, and with that thought she dropped into a strange quietness, deepening as she went on, in which she had a hundred emotions and convictions. She was never going to strum that waltz again, she had played cards for the last, horrible time, the loneliness, the slowness, the oppression were ended, all ended.

'I'm going away!'

She felt warm, her body tingled with a light delicious thrill that was like the caress of a soft night-wind. There were no fears now. A certain indignation, approaching fury even, sprang up instead, as

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she thought: 'No one will believe I've gone. But it's true – I'm going at last.'

Her bag grew heavy. Setting it down in the grass she sat on it for a brief while, in something like her attitude in the dark room during the afternoon, and indeed actually began to rub her gloved fingers over the backs of her hands. A phrase or two of the waltz came back to her. . . . That silly piano! Its bottom G was flat, had always been flat! How ridiculous! She tried to conjure up some sort of vision of London, but it was difficult and in the end she gave way again to the old cry: 'I'm going away.' And she was pleased more than ever deeply.

On the station a single lamp burned, radiating a fitful yellowness that only increased the gloom. And worse, she saw no one and in the cold emptiness traced and retraced her footsteps without the friendly assurance of another sound. In the black distance all the signals showed hard circles of red, looking as if they could never change. But she nevertheless told herself over and over again: 'I'm going away – I'm going away.' And later: 'I hate every one. I've changed until I hardly know myself.'

Impatiently she looked for the train. It was strange. For the first time it occurred to her to know the time and she pulled back the sleeve of her coat. Nearly six-thirty! She felt cold. Up the line every signal displayed its red ring, mocking her. 'Six-thirty, of course, of course.' She tried to be careless. 'Of course, it's late, the train is late,' but the cold-

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ness, in reality her fear, increased rapidly, until she could no longer believe those words. . . .

Great clouds, lower and more than ever depressing, floated above her head as she walked back. The wind had a deep note that was sad too. These things had not troubled her before, now they, also, spoke failure and foretold misery and dejection. She had no spirit, it was cold, and she was too tired even to shudder.

In the absolutely dark, drowsy room she sat down, telling herself: 'This isn't the only day. Some day I shall go. Some day.'

She was silent. In the next room they were playing cards and her father suddenly moaned: 'I thought the ace had gone.' Somebody laughed. Her father's voice came again: 'I never have a decent hand! I never have a decent hand! Never!'

It was too horrible! She couldn't stand it! She must do something to stop it! It was too much. She began to play the waltz again and the dreamy, sentimental arrangement made her cry.

'This isn't the only day,' she reassured herself. 'I shall go. Some day!'

And again and again as she played the waltz, bent her head and cried, she would tell herself that same thing:

'Some day! Some day!'

NINA

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When first the visitor came to call on them it was spring. For tea there were cream pies, and cakes with cinnamon; and about the room were set pots of anemones, primroses and blackthorn Nina had gathered from the woods the previous day. The sun was shining; and all through tea the visitor sat as if transfigured, his high forehead, his black hair, and the shoulders of his jacket fringed with lines of a feathery gold.

But to Nina it also seemed that after shaking hands with her, and giving her one hasty, half-shy look and asking her name, he did not notice her again. Between him and her mother began a long conversation on all sorts of subjects, on music, the spring, the early heat, the different Easter customs in different countries, with a mention of her father, who had died a year before.

And from this conversation she gathered that Strawn, the visitor, was a pianist and had lived abroad, but that when she had been a little girl had lived in England and visited them often, a friend of her father's. She could not remember this, but the

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thought that he played on the piano thrilled her. She began to say to herself, regarding shyly his long, white fingers, his sunny face and dark eyes:

‘After tea I will ask if he will play to us and perhaps hear me play.’

For a long time she sat still, wondering in a shy, apprehensive way what he would think of her.

All the time her mother and the visitor would talk absorbedly to each other. Outside a soft wind was blowing: emerald buds bounced against each other and dust sometimes came tinkling up against the panes. The edges of some pines at the end of the road were being turned first gold, then red, by the setting sun and among them were already masses of darkness. Tea went on for a long time until the lines of gold vanished from Strawn’s face and all the colours of the room merged into one colour.

Nevertheless, all this time, she thought: ‘In a little while he will say something to me. Soon he will ask if I play.’

And she began to think of what she should play to him, a dance of Brahms’, some Schumann, some Mozart. She lost herself in dreaming of this, lost herself so completely that when she suddenly looked up and saw him laughing, the reality of the laugh, the sparkle of his eyes and the joyful way he smacked his hands together came as a shock to her.

Just at that moment he looked at her too. She flushed a dark crimson and began tapping her nails together in confusion. Then she waited for him to

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speak to her and in the midst of her bewilderment was filled suddenly with a desire to know him better, to attract and impress him.

When he did not speak to her she thought with disappointment and sadness, 'It's because I'm only a girl, only seventeen.'

And from that moment she had a constant longing: 'If only I were older, only a little older!'

Soon afterwards, at last, tea was finished. Nina's mother and the visitor got up, still talking, and went into the garden. Nina remained behind and for a long time sat watching with a dreamy, naive expression the chair where Strawn had sat. Each time she thought of his silence towards her she felt hurt, envious of her mother, disappointed and sad.

Before, she had been irresponsible and vivacious, playing in the woods, the garden and on the piano without care. Now, each time she thought of the visitor, she was conscious of a desire to be attractive, but what precise degree of attraction would be best, if she should be smiling, graceful, quiet or melancholy, she did not know.

She got up and looked at her face in the glass. In appearance she was dark, with a skin which in the twilight was pale, waxen and alight. And that she should be able to use this loveliness, together with that of her voice, her movements and her playing, in order to attract anyone, thrilled her excitedly.

Soon afterwards she opened the window an inch or two, and sitting down at the piano began playing.

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And while playing she thought of her mother and Strawn walking under the cherry-trees, among the raspberry and gooseberry bushes, and all the time hoped and wondered if they would hear her.

And then, sometime later, she heard voices, footsteps and Strawn saying, 'Good-bye.'

And soon afterwards she was conscious of shaking hands, waiting for Strawn to say something about the piece she had played with the window open and of an acute, lingering disappointment because he said nothing, scarcely even looked at her, but walked abruptly away. . . .

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Some time later she learned that he had moved his residence and in future would be nearer them and come to see them and even stay more often.

She played the piano untiringly and before each visit contrived somehow to decorate everywhere with spring flowers, arrange her hair attractively, and make the special cream pies which she believed he loved.

But at each visit it seemed to her that he gave his attention only to her mother. And each time he left she was wretched, angry, disappointed and sad.

Then it happened that once when he came, unexpected, her mother was not there. It was evening time and Nina was among the gooseberry-bushes at the bottom of the garden, eating young gooseberries and thinking how thrilling it would be if Strawn were to come suddenly and find her there.

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When his head appeared among the trees and he called: 'Where are you?' she was startled and scratched her hands and dropped some gooseberries she had been holding in her dress.

After that she did not move, but only watched him come towards her. As he came to her he half-smiled and said:

'It's Nina, isn't it?'

She nodded and said: 'My mother isn't here.'

'She didn't know, she was not expecting me,' he smiled. He took off his hat and fanned his face and blew out his cheeks like a boy. She laughed shyly and said:

'Perhaps you had better come and sit down and wait for her. She's gone to the village.'

He seemed not to hear this and asked: 'What are you eating?'

'Gooseberries.'

'I'll eat some too,' he said.

And for a long time afterwards she remembered the way he foraged in the bushes, picking gooseberries; and how, throwing them up in the air he caught them again in his mouth, crunched them up at once and made sour faces. And all the time, as she watched him and laughed, it seemed that the past was only a dream and that her emotions about him were at last what she had wished them to be, and were fierce and passionate, like little revolutions in the streets of her mind.

'I can talk and be understood!' she thought.

NINA

They fell into conversation and soon afterwards left off picking gooseberries and went and sat in the summer-house and talked of the spring. Later they talked of herself and of music. The way he talked she thought wonderful and enchanting. And while listening to him she clasped her hands and let her face fall sideways upon them, lightly and with joy.

Once she unclasped her hands, looked serious and said:

‘I want to ask you something.’

‘What is it you want to ask?’

And she said timidly: ‘Why is it you haven’t spoken to me?’

For having spoken she felt bewildered and ashamed. She tried to turn away, but he seized her hands and tried to look into her hot, flushed face, which she hung downwards to her breast. And he began to whisper:

‘Nina, tell me what I’ve done, forgive me, you don’t understand.’

But suddenly she had no thought of sadness and was aware only of the superb happiness given her by his voice and his presence.

‘I only wanted to talk to you!’ she cried.

He laughed. Nina laughed too and said:

‘But now all that’s gone – it’s all right. I’m happy!’

They went on talking. Dusk fell, the little gooseberries lost themselves in the dark trees, and above the bigger trees spread like broad, black umbrellas put up to keep off the dew. The dusk, the warm-

NINA

smelling silence and Strawn's voice excited her imagination. She began to tell herself, with little flutters of joy, 'He is in love with me, he is in love with me!'

She thought that she too was in love. And from that moment it seemed that her love was serious, passionate and tender. As they sat there Strawn saw that she had scratched her hands and, wetting his handkerchief, bathed off the blood. And it seemed to Nina that now where the smart had been burned something joyful and pleasant instead.

As they went into the house to look for her mother she kept laughing. Her eyes would light up and she would exclaim:

'I'm so happy – and yet I don't know why!'

'Yes? That's lovely,' he would say.

She would watch if he were watching her. And all the time it seemed to her that he must know why she was so happy, why she kept saying absurd things, flinging her arms about, and asking him to look at the trees, the sky and the flowers sleeping in the painted stillness of coming darkness.

When he did not seem to notice the reason of all this she would console herself: 'It will happen! It will come!'

Now she no longer wanted to play to him or hear him play, but only to be near him, to be excited by him and listen to his voice.

She would look at his face and think joyfully: 'He understands!'

NINA

At the sight of her mother, who came suddenly running down the steps of the house saying, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry!' she was no longer envious or sad. When they all three went into the house and Strawn for the first time played Mozart on the piano to them, little thrills of pure joy like lovely scales ran up and down her spine, and when he ceased playing, apologized and declared, 'I'm getting old,' she thought of the way he had blown his cheeks out like a boy and eaten gooseberries in the garden. And she thought of him only as being young, understanding and splendid.

When she went to bed at last he smiled and pressed her hand and said: 'Have nice dreams.'

On the stairs and in her bedroom, where she did not undress but sat at the window listening to the owls, she thought of this, of his splendid, dark eyes, his voice, of the entrancing, wonderful things he had said. And she thought that she loved him and perhaps was loved, and was conscious of looking forward to summer and of what summer would be like with him.

It seemed that long afterwards, as she still sat there, she heard the voices of Strawn and her mother coming from below.

Her heart raced, her body trembled and suddenly she longed to go down and look at him for one moment longer.

She took off her shoes and went down. On the stairs and everywhere it was dark, and the darkness

NINA

seemed to give Strawn's voice a new sound of enchantment and mystery.

At the foot of the stairs she stood still and listened and heard him say:

'Sometimes it's a thousand, sometimes only five hundred.'

Nina went forward, stood at the open door of the drawing-room and, after listening a moment, looked in. And she saw suddenly that in a sad sort of way, before the fire, her mother was pressing her temples against Strawn's knees and that every now and then she would look up, murmur something and make passionate little signs on his knees, and that Strawn would bend down, whisper in return and draw away his face with tenderness and longing.

She started. Beginning to breathe heavily she did not know what to do with the immense sadness which filled her.

But in a little while she turned, retreated slowly upstairs and in a dull, stupefied way, undressed and got into bed. And as she lay there looking at the stars she began to cry, and it seemed to her that the sounds she made turned and went suddenly through her head, like tiresome children playing up and down stairs. And it seemed too that the scratches on her hands began to smart again and that in her mouth returned a taste of something unpleasant and sour, like the taste of young gooseberries.

THE VOYAGE

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She was one of those very clean, unpretentious and unlovable little boats plying regularly between London and the Dutch coast. Having left the port just after eight o'clock, she had succeeded in reaching the open sea before darkness fell. Her passengers, moving or grouped between the piles of baggage on her decks, had not then begun to think of going below, and conversing among themselves remained gazing ahead through the semi-darkness, wondering secretly what lay before them in the open sea.

The passenger seated at the far end of the stern had not once glanced out into the distance ahead of her, and long before this had wrapped her shawl closely about her head and turned her face to the shore. Under the luminous reflection of the sea's surface and within the darkness of her shawl her face seemed very white; against the restlessness of the figures passing and repassing it on the dark deck behind and the capricious twinkle of lights ashore it was calm and resigned, too.

It did not seem startled at the voice accosting it suddenly but gently from behind, with the words:

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'I just managed to get the last berth.'

She cried out: 'I didn't know you'd gone! – The last? – only one?'

In reply to this there was a faint nod from the man who had advanced in order to lean upon the deck-rail. He coughed weakly before repeating in a whisper that seemed painful to him:

'Yes – only one.'

The face of the woman turned itself upward with a jerk. 'You must cover your chest – you must, you must. I keep telling you.'

'Yes – I will.' A hand, very white and frail too, stole up to his chest and closed the opening then. 'Will that do?' he whispered.

For the first time since he had left her there half an hour before the woman rose. Her voice had grown insistent. 'You mustn't stay up here!' she urged. She followed up these words with a compelling gesture of her hands. Then suddenly her voice became affected with a fresh, unexpected emotion – a tenderness almost girlish in its quivering earnestness.

'You must think! – remember what they said. The night air – so deadly' – her voice nearly lost itself in the tragic difficulties of these last words – 'it's so dangerous!'

In the pale luminosity rising from the milky waves about the stern the man's smile seemed doubly faded. It did not seem to be connected with anything. His voice was very detached and feeble, too.

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'It can't be helped. Not another bunk in the whole ship,' he whispered.

The woman put her hands up to the throat which had had to struggle even with these words and covered it firmly, as if to instil in the man a sense of their power and unswerving determination.

'You must go down – now, now.' She actually seized his shoulders, as if to put into action this commanding entreaty. 'Not a minute longer!'

'I'm not tired.' He averted his face. 'I swear I'm not,' he repeated vaguely.

From the woman there was a gleam of white teeth, as if of a sudden yet faint anger. It reached him as he prepared to speak again. Against it he became silent, watching the waves which had on their heads flashes of white illuminating the darkness with similar swiftness. The woman followed his gaze. These gleams of white seemed to her suddenly expressive of mortal enmity, as if having designs on the figure at her side. For the first time there came a note of desperation into her voice.

'I don't like it – go down, my dear – I'll come and see you now and then. I shan't sleep.'

He gave her a single wistful and very timid look of protest, which she dismissed with gentleness. The concern she had put into her words she put also into a little push which sent him a little nearer the companion-way. Half-way there she frustrated an attempt of his to return by whispering determinedly:

'I shall be angry with you!'

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A moment after he had gone she walked to the head of the stairs, cast one look down them and then returned.

Her mouth relapsed into its quiet solemnity immediately. As if by some inherent instinct or some habit borne fatally upon her by circumstances, the woman once again gazed only backward. The lights of the English coast still studded the edge of a cloudy sky. Without hesitation the woman fixed her eyes on them. Such gaze of this nature had not filled them before: it was as if of some memory disturbed by reality, of some sharp experience allied with dreams. Beneath it the woman was silent, very still, watching the lights die gradually in the darkness.

They expired gently and almost imperceptibly at last. The woman moved her hands and fell into another kind of resignation without resting from the first. Her expression altered accordingly, allied itself more closely with realities, and seemed to dismiss its former dreams for the sake of a single fresh one. She remembered without visible alarm, but with disarming silence, the expression she had last seen on her husband's face – its faint smile, its indecision, its boyishness, its look of physical weariness. 'He was so tired,' she thought.

Half-wistful, she sat like this for a long time, watching the white, curling lips of the waves, the lights of other ships passing, the dark figures moving aimlessly about the deck on which she sat. The ship bore itself softly out through the darkness. The night

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advanced softly, too. Now and then she caught the chatter of voices above the rumble of screws and the noise of the sea. Some people were eating down below. From them also came the voice of a man arguing with the purser.

‘But can’t I sleep with my wife?’ she heard him whine.

‘I’m afraid not, sir – not to-night – third-class very full, sir. Single berths.’

She sighed and in the ensuing silence wondered if her husband could be asleep yet. A thought struck her with painful abruptness: ‘What if there should have been not even one berth?’ Her head became full of fears, of many remembrances of doctor’s orders, of warnings, the deadly nature of whose truth had been borne steadily upon her. ‘The night air – dangerous!’ she thought.

She gave herself up to long reflections, enlarging on these early thoughts with fear, with stoicism, even with wonder. Facing them again and again she ceased gradually to be afraid of them. Then, without warning, some sharp words flashing out suddenly from that past which she had so long dwelt upon, undid all this.

‘You had better take him away – quickly – it can’t be long.’

She remembered clearly her refusal to believe this, as even now she sometimes refused to believe the existence of the dark sea bearing them steadily outward. This unbelief had not lasted long, however.

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Gradually she had seemed to become surrounded by symbols of death itself – his weary gestures, his cough, his hopeful frailty, the way he sometimes shut his eyes for a moment or two and sighed. She had become terrified by them without arousing his suspicions.

Sitting very wide awake on the half-lit deck, deserted except for one or two silent figures, she began to reproach herself: ‘Oh! I should have been more careful!’ She should never have allowed him to run after the berths, she thought. She should not have proclaimed her fears so loudly at the critical moment of his coughing. She should have been more kind, more gentle. Above all, she did not want to make him afraid or acquaint him, even ever so slightly, with those signs of death.

In the morning, she thought, when they disembarked, and began the journey to the place where he was to take ‘the cure,’ she would remedy these things – not a word, not a sign! She would make him smile. With her face still turned towards the ship’s wake, she too allowed herself a single smile over the black waters. It vanished a moment later at the distant sound of a cough not far off. She rose, agitated, made her way along the deck and listened.

‘Only the steward!’ – she managed to sigh with profound relief, trembling a little.

After wrapping her shawl more closely about herself she sat down again, closed her eyes, and passed a long time in reflection. On the dark, sickly face of

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her husband all these reflections had some bearing. Among others there were memories of their youth together, of their unquenchable ardour and hope for the future of those days. They did not pass over her without each leaving some visible impression – in the darkness her features were vivid, pronounced, ardent, her hands expressive of a great vitality, of a hope still not outworn. Gradually a greyness came into the darkness about her. The summer morning shed its faint pink on the waves at last.

At seven o'clock, without having combed her hair, she ran down to her husband.

He was awake – but he had slept! – really he had slept so soundly! – as if he had been going to sleep for ever – just like that – for ever.

She felt she must cry out, but by some means she only smiled and said:

'We are sailing up the river – look! – the green banks, the cows, the poplars. The sun is shining – I watched it rise. They say it's going to be fine – sunny all day long. Get dressed, my darling, we shan't be long!'

She drank some coffee while waiting for him to dress. Excited passengers rushed hither and thither. She gave a steward something to get her luggage on deck.

Very frail and careful in manner, her husband emerged at last. The smiles, the enlivening words she had planned while brooding over a sea that had never ceased to be for her the embodiment of a

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malicious spirit, rose immediately to her lips. 'Look – the churches, the ships, the barges – the sun on the water. Oh! my darling, look!'

Obedying her, he watched the gulls flying to and fro in the sunshine. His health, her previous warnings, her fears, were never mentioned. His coughing in that early morning air clinging with double sharpness over the river did not draw from her one reproachful or startled word. She half-closed her eyes in order that, when looking at him, the harsh, painful shadows of his face should be softened and lessened. The strange, too vivid brightness of his eyes she persuaded herself came from the dazzling reflection of the sun on the water, and when they appeared sombre, as if with a dying spark, it was because the shadow of her hat had overlaid them momentarily.

Right to the very edge of the landing stage she continued her delighted cries: 'Look! – the children in the boats! – the streets! – the canals – oh! how lovely it's going to be!'

She held his arm very gently while descending the gangway – she could feel its bone through the feeble flesh and his sleeve. This was another illusion. 'I hold him so strongly – it's no wonder,' she thought.

At the entrance to the Customs drivers and porters besieged her with broken English. She handed her luggage to one of them and gave an address: they would not move on until to-morrow.

Turning her face suddenly to her husband she sought and seized one of his hands and pressed it

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against her side. Her eyes, amazingly young and bright, seemed full of courage, of the determination of her dreams, the fearlessness of her deep resolves. They sparkled with irrepressible fire before she spoke again.

‘We will walk. It’s so beautiful – so sunny.’ She sought desperately to awaken in his pale features the semblance of a smile. ‘We have not far to go.’

THE IDIOT

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In the little blue-walled chapel the choir streamed in, and having bowed irregularly, faced the western window and blinked in the glare of the evening sun. Below a congregation had already gathered, and opposite, in the gallery, groups of little boys were huddled like noisy puppies. There some one would now and then hiss warningly:

‘Sssh! Sssh!’

To this, however, the children paid no heed but only shuffled their feet, laughed and talked more loudly and suddenly exchanged ecstatic whispers:

‘Taddo’s come! There’s Taddo the idiot!’

One by one they turned to the new-comer, a tall youth of nineteen or twenty, and began to laugh at his vacant face staring from his green, threadbare overcoat, and when he sat down, having forgotten to take off his hat, called to him:

‘Taddo! Taddo! Get up! It’s the hymn! Stand up!’

To their shrieking amusement he obeyed, mutely gazing for a minute at the other seated figures, before

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feverish hands dragged him down and voices whispered into his dirty ears:

‘You mustn’t stand up, Taddo! Sit down, that’s all.’

Grinning piteously he sat down, but when they laughed again did not understand and shrank into his overcoat. And as he listened to the hubbub of chatter about him it seemed that every one, even the preacher and the familiar coloured figures in the windows, were laughing at him.

When the hymn began he remembered the warning and remained seated. Shadows fell over him, making him feel safe like a child that cowers between the legs of its father when a dog barks; and believing that every one had forgotten him, he suddenly chuckled deeply.

Instantly the boys lowered their books, exchanged glances and tittered loudly. One or two older people grew stern with shock, but the hymn surged on at a great shout, only Taddo remaining silent. When the singing ended the boys became quiet too and only laughed with their eyes.

Through the prayer, the following hymn and the reading of the lesson Taddo sat with his head drawn into his overcoat, as if cringing under a blow. Soon the ray of sunlight that had rested on his head disappeared, the air grew dim and he became like a dark statue. About him the boys, tired of singing and listening, began to sketch fat men in their books and write couplets on the yellow seats. In the

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gallery was a never-ceasing riot of muttering and laughter.

At Taddo's side two boys would now and then whisper urgently:

'Make a noise like an owl, Taddo! Fire a gun! Wring a hen's neck!'

Sometimes to those requests he would merely stare as if the speakers were transparent, at others chuckle without obeying, but now and then he would hold an imaginary gun to his shoulder, softly mimic an owl and with a choking sound stretch the neck of an invisible hen.

On all sides the boys would laugh like things exploding. Once there came a desperate hiss of warning and a voice appealing to him in an under-current of whispers:

'Be quiet, be quiet!'

And in a minute he paused, then, growing afraid, buried his head in the thick shadows that lay piled from his feet to his waist. There he tried to breathe furtively, but instead only snorted like a cow. Thinking this to be some new mimicry the boys broke out into fresh laughter, coughed chokingly and dug fingers into his back, so that he became dizzy and imagining himself to be falling headlong over the gallery, tried to shout out. But the result was like the neigh of a horse, startling enough for some one to warn him:

'Taddo! Taddo!'

He lowered his head.

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‘Do you want to be turned out?’ he was asked.

It was the voice of the teacher, and from its tone Taddo at last understood that by imitating the voices of owls, dying hens and animals he had committed some wrong. Sweating and trembling with fear, he folded his arms about his head.

In that attitude of dejection he remained during the next hymn.

By that time the sun had vanished and from the sullen mouth of the west clouds were already surging, making everywhere sultry and dark. Watching Taddo the boys began to think he had fallen into a fit and were silent like a brood of chickens under a sack.

‘What’s the matter with Taddo?’ their minds asked. ‘Why does he look like that?’

But the youth suspected nothing and solemnly played with the beans, nutshells and crumbs he found in his pockets. All the time thoughts swam like sleepy fish into his brain.

The organ played again, but raising his head Taddo saw that no one rose at the sound. He pondered on this, then heard money chinking on all sides of him and saw white plates passing from hand to hand. Fascinated he watched their surfaces darken, but when a plate approached and touched him, became afraid and passed it on with a violent jerk.

Something fell into his lap.

Looking down he at first thought a silver hole had

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been cut in his trousers. Then he touched it: slowly the burning shape of a shilling became imprinted on his flesh.

The sermon began. He sat like an image, cold and unable to feel his heart beat, and conscious only of the fiery spot in his hand, burning like a brand-mark.

And because he had made neither movement nor sound for so long the boys began whispering again: 'Taddo! Taddo!'

He shut his eyes, breathed warily and did not answer.

'He's asleep!' they told each other.

He let in little trembling chinks of light through his lashes. The chapel seemed very dark, full of green shapes which made soft collisions with each other. These and the words of the preacher, which he imagined to be accusing him, made him long to be outside again.

In the chapel it grew darker and darker, people looked at each other, at the umbrella-stands and thick windows and muttered:

'There's thunder about.'

But while they preserved composure Taddo grew more afraid, and seeing in the dark air and the grey faces only malice and hostility, glanced about him like a girl faced with rape. To his terrified eyes everything had changed. He tried to cry out, but nothing happened. Then, glancing up at the choir, it seemed that the archway there was the cavernous mouth of some great beast, open in a fierce yawn

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which not only seemed to expand but advance as if to swallow him up. In the distance was born a profound growl, making him grip his fingers in fear, and in the roof a great roar, scattering echoes.

Every moment he expected to be exposed or annihilated and at last, unable to bear his fears any longer, he leapt up and ran from the chapel, whimpering.

Outside there fell on him a grey rain, heavy as the thunder which hammered at the clouds until they opened like dark doors and let in the lightning. In the flashes the roofs and pools glared like brass. As his clothes became soaked it seemed that from one terror he had run directly into another and, seeing the woods lying far down the road like black tents, ran to them for sanctuary.

Over him the sky was dark as a bruise, and as he ran he began to feel old and dispirited, but on reaching the woods the trees seemed to cry out to him in pity and the rain was no longer cold and like a shower of iron. There, too, was a smell of ferns, of pine-needles and many leaves and sometimes a strange pungent whiff as of old smoke.

He crouched at the foot of a pine, shrank to its reddish trunk and whispered continually:

‘Don’t let them come, don’t let them come!’

Above him the branches purred deeply as if understanding, and he was comforted. But the storm grew worse. Rain and wind rushed constantly through the wood and shudders of thunder along the sky.

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Against Taddo's chest and arms the pine vibrated powerfully, making him babble instinctive prayers.

Then he remembered the shilling and at once it seemed to him that for the storm's long affliction nothing else could be responsible; and he suddenly buried it in the dark earth.

The rain washed it up again. He stared and cried out:

'I didn't steal it! I didn't steal it!'

He buried it again and when it was upheaved a second time thought there must be magic in it and shouted:

'I'll take it back!'

On the road to the village he blubbered in his desperation. His only comfort was from the thought that soon the shilling would pass into other hands and that the storm would die.

But there were no lights in the slender windows of the chapel and for some minutes he hammered on its door like a child upon an empty box, disappointed and wondering.

Ten o'clock struck as he knocked at the house of the minister. When the door was opened there came to him a warm, protective smell like that of dry linen, which made him forget the rainy darkness, the wood and his fears. When the minister spoke he merely answered:

'It's the shilling.'

The man looked at his outstretched palm with a startled air.

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'It's the shilling,' repeated Taddo.

But the other was silent.

'Take it! Take it!' whimpered the youth, his face half in the light. 'The shilling – take it!'

'Go home, my boy,' he was advised. 'Go home.'

His frenzied whispers poured out as if through a sudden leak: 'Take it! Only take it! It's the shilling! The shilling!'

The minister obeyed at last. For a moment nothing happened. Then suddenly it seemed that out there in the darkness was a mirror reflecting some strange light which even the shadow of the closing door could not darken.

In the warmth of the house the minister pondered, and thinking of the boy's drenched figure shuddered decently and said: 'God have mercy, God have mercy,' and went to bed. There he forgot the shilling.

But for Taddo everything was different, and as he walked away it seemed to him that the calming earth, the sweet air, the fresh-smelling trees and the stars appearing in the broken sky like inquisitive children, were all whispering to him: 'The storm is over, the storm is over.'

And he began to sing.

BLOSSOMS

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Every morning, except in treacherous weather, Francie got on her bicycle and rode a distance of more than two miles to the town in order to take her son to school. She was a widow, undersized and puffed out with stoutness. But in spite of this she rode always with her shoulders squarely braced, gripping the handle-bars tightly, her forefingers extended rigidly downward towards the brakes, her knees bobbing up and down like two little pistons under her skirts. About her floppy waist were fastened, tightly also, the fingers of her son, dangling between the saddle and the wheel like a frightened fly.

The journey began from the top of a hill on which sat a row of new villas blinking red and white in the sun. From the moment Francie skipped awkwardly into the saddle the bicycle flew, gathering speed recklessly, creaking under its double weight, ticking excitedly, spurting up fierce, whirring dust into the flashing wheels. The wind made a swoop up the hill like an excited boy. Her skirts laughed against her legs. Her breath ebbed away in fluttering little waves. Trees lumbered past, and between them and

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the road raced the grass in two never-dying ribbons of bright green fire.

Then, half-way down, with a fear of calamity encircling her breast like a cold band, she would set her teeth and put on the brakes. The sound made was as if many matches were being struck against the wheels. Then carefully, sometimes tremblingly, she released them again, and the bicycle glided with its heavy load into the safety of the level avenue of trees below.

Francie loved the thrilling wind in her skirts, the flashing grass, the tick of the bicycle, and in a squeakily excited voice she would pant out:

'How did you like that? Wasn't that lovely? You're holding on tight, aren't you? That's right then!'

Behind her the boy clung like some tiny parasite, frightened to stir, staring with dull, stupid eyes which seemed to be smeared with a sort of dark bloom, reflecting nothing. Only by tightened fingers would he acknowledge her words.

Once again, at this, his mother would experience a proud, thrilling pleasure. Up towards the great trees she would turn her round, sweetish face and sigh.

One spring morning, on the road under the trees lay sprinkled soft, reddish dust. It crouched in little heaps under the fringe of grass and peppered the grass itself. The boy, timid and dull, gazed at it and then asked:

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'What is it, Mother? Where has it come from?'

Dropping her head a little to one side Francie smiled and told him: 'The elms are coming into blossom, darling. First of all they come out furry and red, like this. Then in a little while they turn and change pale green. Then the leaves come.'

The bicycle sailed on a long way. Then the boy said:

'Why do they?'

And while she pedalled unceasingly on, her fat legs pumping monotonously beneath her skirt, she would talk to him without turning her head, telling him all she knew of the trees breaking into blossom, and along the roadside point out other trees, the poplars like vain, quivering steeples, the slumberous oaks and beeches, the dark, grave pines and soft firs, and the shy birches hanging their heads.

She would speak to him with soft simplicity, sensitively, so that sometimes the fingers about her waist would seem to tighten about her heart too. And all the time the boy would answer with grave monosyllables, as if confused even by her words.

From the avenue they rode into clear, green space, and thence into the town. Through the streets they glided serenely, like a balloon on wheels, past other children, Francie with her simple, moon-like face looking neither to right nor left, the boy resting stupidly one frightened cheek on the back of her tender body. Sometimes the children, from the pavement, would flutter amusement, but Francie and the

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boy never turned their heads, and the front wheel of the bicycle never wavered.

At the school she alighted, wheeled the boy to the gates and lifting him off with one arm, pressed her noisy, damp lips to his cheeks and began flabbily to wave her hand to him.

‘Good-bye – be careful! Good-bye, good-bye!’ she sang, ‘good-bye!’

Her eyes pondered over his going. After his disappearance she wheeled the bicycle off, frisked, wriggled and, finding the saddle at last, methodically began the journey back again. As far as the hill her knees pumped indefatigably, her skirts kept up their soft flutter, and the bicycle its furious ticking. Every morning, however, at the foot of the hill, she skipped off, and a little breathless, began to walk.

As she climbed the hill, her stout figure leaning on the machine, she would recall the moment when she and the boy had sped recklessly the other way, both dumb with excitement and fear, and would sometimes imagine she felt his half-terrified fingers still sticking like blunt claws into her side. And then she would recall his face, in reality stupid, unenlightened and mute, but to her so simply and eloquently beautiful, so much more than a face, that she did not see it but felt it softly at her breast like an emotion.

His questions about the trees and flowers she recollected too. All the thoughts which in his stupidity he had not expressed she shaped for herself

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in her heart, as she might imagine the soft shades of unopened flowers.

And it seemed that as she would wait for the elms to flower, snow down their redness, scatter their green and be draped in leaves at last, so she was waiting for his changes, his blossoming. And she doted constantly over what this blossoming should bring, and saw him no longer as a frightened, questioning mite carried on her bicycle, but as a youth, strong, virtuous, and clever, and as a man, throwing unconsciously over her the mellow shadow of maturity.

Sometimes, if she reflected thus, the ascent of the hill would seem over in a second, and almost before aware of it she would find herself pushing open the swinging white gate, wheeling the bicycle past the snaky crocus borders, and resting it against the wall.

On the wall, under the south sky, had been set a plum-tree, crucified like some weak, lank spider. Francie had planted it for the boy's birthday. She cared lavishly for it. Every morning she set the bicycle clear of it, and when she saw it was needed, broke off dead twigs and nailed up loose ones, as if to crucify it yet more securely.

Here, as when on the bicycle and when struggling up the hill, she dwelt on her devotion to the boy, her face, like some large pink and white melon, shining at the thought of him. Like his her eyes glowed as if clouded with bloom. Sometimes about the house she sang with a soft, floating soprano, and would be

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reminded then of the days when she had really sung, taking the solo-parts in oratorio, and singing once at the Crystal Palace, in London, in a choir of five thousand voices. Then it would be her fervent wish that the boy might become a singer, too.

After this she thought: 'Soon I ought to have his voice tested. I must let some one hear it! I must think of his future.'

One night, before tenderly pressing his head into the warm camphor-smelling pillow, she actually took courage and asked him to sing.

He raised his head and stared. 'Sing?' His eyes gleamed duller than ever with their sombre bloom. 'Why must I?'

'I want to hear you – for something. Sing, my darling! Then some day perhaps you will sing in opera, or at least like mummy did, in London, in a choir of five thousand people! And mummy would like that.'

But the boy put his face to the pillow and pouted his fat lips, oozing stupidity. Francie rested her flabby cheeks on his and kissed him slobberingly, and when he had gone to sleep wept over him for both misery and joy.

In the morning, however, as they flew down the hill, she sang tremulously, like a bird wondering if spring has come, the notes of her soft, reedy soprano floating in the air like irresponsible feathers. Above her the sky curved gently and softly, resting itself like a giant blue petal on the green rims of the wide,

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sunny world. Larks sang everywhere and she thought: 'How happy I am!' This morning she did not put on the brakes. The bicycle swooped like an arrow into the soft drifts of elm-blossom under the trees.

There again the boy asked: 'What is it? I forgot what you said.'

She almost sang in reply: 'The elms are coming into blossom! I told you yesterday! Into blossom, into flower!'

The bicycle sailed on, and then again his voice asked: 'Why do they?'

But to all his stupidity and forgetfulness she was tenderly blind, once again imagining all the things he might have said, her thoughts coloured like flowers. When returning she lifted her face to the spring sky, drank from its cascade of sweet, gold spice, and felt within her the soul of the boy softly move, gladden and blossom with her own.

Then, soon afterwards, in the avenue, the elms, instead of red blossom, began to shower down their second flowers, like a storm of green confetti. Every day Francie told the boy what this meant, and showed him also the poplars and elms, the oaks and beeches, the birches and pines. And every night, into his stupid face she put her own, simple, moon-like and soft, and whispered:

'Sing, my darling. Some day you may sing in opera, in a big hall, or like mummy did, in a choir so big no one will know who you are.'

BLOSSOMS

And in the avenue the poplars became swaying steeples of green, stroking the sky, and on the south wall, crucified in the sun, the plum-tree stirred itself, wakened, and softly burst into a blossom of silky stars.

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